Dreams of My Russian Summers Study Guide

Dreams of My Russian Summers by Andreï Makine

BOOKRAGS

Contents

Plot Summary

DREAMS OF MY RUSSIAN SUMMERS is the story of a young unnamed narrator, growing up in communist Russia, struggling to come to terms with his own self-identity. Throughout the novel, the narrator struggles to decide whether he is Russian or French, based on the stories of his grandmother's past in France. The novel opens with the narrator flipping through photographs of family members about whom he would like to learn more. This opens his grandmother's memory to a flood of stories starting way back from when her parents were children. Charlotte, the grandmother, experienced many of the stories she tells her grandchildren herself, and some of them were passed on from her own parents and their parents before them. No matter whose stories they are, the stories come alive through Charlotte's storytelling, and it appears as if she had been present at every major historical event in both French and Russian history. Aiding her storytelling are the various newspaper clippings Charlotte has saved throughout her life in the infamous Siberian suitcase.

During his summers with his grandmother, the narrator asks many questions and often sways back and forth between having strict Russian nationalism and strict French nationalism. When he is younger, the narrator is completely swept away with the magic of Charlotte's stories and spends all his time reading about French history, much to the damage of his Russian social life. In time, the narrator begins to question the sentimentality of Charlotte's stories, particularly after the death of both his parents. The narrator storms to Saranza, where Charlotte is living, to confront her about her brainwashing. He quickly realizes, however, that Charlotte is completely alone in Siberia and the summers when he had visited her had been perhaps the only times in her adult life that she had been able to speak French, thus preserving her culture and her personal history. The narrator decides that Charlotte's stories must be protected since they are the only fragile thread holding Charlotte to her past.

Throughout the course of the novel, both the narrator and the reader learn much about Charlotte's troubled history, hoping to solve the riddle as to why she feels so connected to Russia even though she is, by nationality, French. The reader learns that Charlotte met and married a Russian soldier named Fyodor who was arrested on New Year's Eve, suspected of being a spy. After his release, Fyodor was sent to a repatriation camp which was supposed to keep him away from home for a few days, but actually kept him away for five years. During Fyodor's absence, Charlotte received two letters declaring his death, but she refused to believe them. Instead, she patiently waited for him to return home, and he did, five years later, covered in mud, scars, and open wounds. Even though Charlotte did her best to care for Fyodor, he died from his wounds a year later. It becomes clear that even though her husband is gone, Charlotte will never leave his side. The narrator also learns that when Charlotte was young, she was raped by a group of Uzbekian soldiers in the Siberian desert. They raped her, beat her, shot her in the head, and left her for dead. But Charlotte survived. She was impregnated during the rape and went on to have her first child, a son, Sergei. Even though Fyodor knew the boy wasn't his, he raised him and loved him as his own.

The narrator struggles to come to terms with these facts, as he continues to struggle with his own self-identity. While watching a prostitute have sex with a group of soldiers through the portholes of a boat, the narrator is shocked to see the image of the prostitute through the tiny windows. Her body, and image, seems to be chopped in half since he can only see her bottom half or upper half at one time. When looking through the top window, the narrator notices how calm the prostitute's face is; she even picks at old nail polish on her fingernails. While looking through the bottom window, the narrator sees the violent ways her body is being pounded by the soldiers. In a way, he feels a deep connection to the prostitute as he struggles to reconcile how these two halves can belong to the same person; in a way, it is the same as the narrator struggles to reconcile how his two halves, his French half and his Russian half, belong to the same person.

In his adulthood, the narrator moves to France and lives there, without contact with his grandmother, for twenty years. Suddenly, he feels himself beginning to slip into madness, as if his grandmother is following him, calling out to him. He hires a private investigator to find out if Charlotte is still alive. The narrator plans to pick Charlotte up and bring her back to live with him in France so he can write her life story. He finds, however, that Charlotte has passed away and he is now all alone in the world, which has a profound impact on him even though he has not spoken to her in over twenty years. As his inheritance, Charlotte sends him a letter explaining from where he had come, hoping to settle the debate between his French and Russian heritages once and for all. In the letter, the narrator finds out that his actual birth mother was a prisoner in a Gulag camp Charlotte had been sent to monitor during the war. When the woman died, leaving behind a two-year-old child, Charlotte smuggled the baby out of the camp to be raised by her own daughter, the narrator's adoptive mother.

Chapters 1 & 2

Chapters 1 & 2 Summary

The novel opens with the narrator, an unnamed boy, discussing what makes French women so alluring in photographs. He calls the classic look on their faces, the slightly pursed lips, "petite pomme." Through exploring this look, the narrator recounts memories of all the strong women in his life, although none are yet named. Finally, the narrator introduces his maternal grandmother, the daughter of Norbert and Albertine Lemonnier.

Throughout his life, the narrator recalls visiting his French grandmother in Russia, where she lived after marrying a man from Moscow. The narrator spends a lot of his time flipping through old family photographs. One day he comes across a photograph of a scruffy-looking woman wearing a man's shapka, clutching a baby to her breast. The rest of the people in the photograph seem to glide by in elegant clothing. When the grandmother, whom the narrator often calls Charlotte, sees the young boy looking at the photograph, a look of panic spreds across her face and she refuses to answer any questions about who the woman might be.

In a second memory that impacts the narrator, he recalls unwrapping his grandmother's rock collection with his elder sister. The two children toss the rocks that they find uninteresting out the window, or smash them into each other, causing the fragile rocks to beak. When Charlotte walks in on the scene, tears sprout in her grey eyes, and the children are deeply ashamed. They have never seen their grandmother cry before. Later, she tells the children that a mustached soldier had approached her in the crowd during the victory parade and offered her this small fragment of metal, the Verdun. The Verdun is one of her most prized possessions and she begs the children to go and find it again.

After the children find the scrap of Verdun and return it to their grandmother, they sit together on the porch while she weaves stories of the Paris flood for them. They are enraptured with their grandmother's stories, and struggle to separate the fantasy world she is creating from reality. At times, the children can see the glint of the floodwaters off the streets, and hear the muffled voices at the end of the Parisian streets, even though they are visiting their grandmother in Moscow.

In Chapter Two, the narrator discusses the Russian city in which his grandmother Charlotte lives. Although Charlotte is the same age as a Russian babushka, she has no interest in acting like one, and the Russian babushkas do not pressure her to fit in. The milkmaid, on the other hand, seems to love that Charlotte is unlike the rest of the elderly women in the neighborhood and comes to lie on Charlotte's clean living room floor, stretched out on the hardwood, to rest her muscles after a long day lugging the churn around town.

Another interesting and unique relationship Charlotte has with an outsider in town is her relationship with Gavrilych, the town drunk. When most people encounter Gavrilych, they cross to the other side of the street. But Gavrilych calls Charlotte by her proper Christian name, Sharlota Norbertovna, and clearly has a bit of a crush on her, perhaps because she is the only person in town who treats Gavrilych with respect. In these moments, the narrator recognizes, even as a child, that his grandmother is different from the rest of the women in town.

Chapters 1 & 2 Analysis

In Chapters 1 and 2, the dynamic between the narrator and his grandmother is introduced. It is clear, even in the opening section, that Charlotte is keeping secrets from her grandchildren particularly regarding the Verdun, and more importantly, the photograph of the woman holding the baby, wearing the men's shapka. As the novel progresses, the reader and the narrator learn more of the family history about which Charlotte is forthright, and what she attempts to hide from her family.

In this section, the great Paris flood of 1910 is first introduced. Through this imagery, the narrator pictures the city of Paris as a hidden Atlantis, the infamous underwater city. This image first captures the narrator's imagination and pulls him into a dreamlike world where Paris is like a fantasy. The image of the 1910 flood returns again much later in the novel when the narrator begins a descent into madness, and the image of the flood returns to him essentially bringing him back to his senses.

The other important element introduced in this section is the dichotomy between the family's Russian and French influences. It is clear from Charlotte's behavior that she is not like the rest of the Russian grandmothers, even though she is respected as one. This split between cultures is the key to understanding the novel. From Charlotte's stories and influences, the narrator struggles throughout his coming-of-age to understand where he belongs in the world; is he French or is he Russian?

Chapters 3 & 4

Chapters 3 & 4 Summary

In this section, Charlotte continues to describe the France of her childhood to her grandchildren. The narrator admits to not knowing where reality ends and fantasy begins. Even though his grandmother is describing French villages, he can only imagine them in a Russian context, the only context he's ever known. One story that particularly interests the narrator is the story of the Russian Tsar, Nicholas II, visiting France with his wife, Alexandra. Charlotte recounts the events of his visit in vivid detail, reading from newspaper clippings she's saved all these years. She has even managed to save a copy of the menu that was served to Tsar Nicholas II and his wife. The narrator and his sister have no idea what these foods look or taste like, only that "Vine quails a la Lucullus" and "Poulardes du Mans Cambaceres" sound exquisite, and positively French. Charlotte tries to emphasize the importance of Tsar Nicholas II, an absolute monarch, coming face-to-face with the democratic power of France, but this political importance is lost on the children.

Charlotte continues to pull newspaper clippings and photographs from her suitcase, known as The Siberian Suitcase, recounting the details of Tsar Nicholas II's visit. This event captures the imagination of the narrator, and he becomes almost obsessed with the beauty of these two worlds, his own two worlds, enjoying an elegant meal together. Later, when he imagines Tsar Nicholas II viewing the French play, "Les Femmes Savantes," he is enraptured with the description of Russia being told from a French playwrite's eyes. It is as though the young narrator is seeing his country, for the first time, from the outside. This description has a profound and emotional impact on the narrator.

Later, the narrator no longer wants to wait for his grandmother to finish her evening chores before she can carry on discussing Tsar Nicholas II and his visit to France, so he breaks into her Siberian Suitcase, which she keeps under her bed, and frantically flips through the newspaper clippings and photographs attempting to piece together the puzzle of Tsar Nicholas' visit. He does not understand much of what he sees, but he comes to the sudden realization that in time, Tsar Nicholas II will be overthrown by his people, supported by the French, the very people who toasted him at the dinner party in the story the night before. The narrator is outraged. When Charlotte continues the story later that night, the narrator feels terribly guilty. In Charlotte's story, Tsar Nicholas II still sits applauding "Les Femmes Savantes," but the narrator has seen into the future. In an outburst, the narrator begins shouting, cursing the Frenchmen at the dinner party as traitors. He throws himself into his bed, and is calmed only when Charlotte quietly enters his room, and in an act of understanding, presses the Verdun into the narrator's palm.

In Chapter Four, the narrator and his sister return to their own town and school, which has a profoundly different recollection of history than Charlotte did. In school, the

narrator learns that Tsar Nicholas II was also known as "Nicholas the Bloody" and that he was responsible for thousands of deaths in Russia in the early 1900's. Even when the narrator objects that Tsar Nicholas II was far more complex than that - he even enjoyed the theater! - it becomes clear to him that he is the only pupil who sees things differently.

Later, the narrator and his sister wait in a ration line for some oranges being handed out. When the narrator's sister clumsily joins him in line, the rest of the crowd believe the children are trying to take two rations worth of food and throw them out into the snow. Even when the narrator pleads with the people, they are unrelenting. He and his sister return to the back of the line, shivering, knowing they will receive no oranges that day, but do not feel defeated. They share a moment, with a secret wink, remembering the warmth of their grandmother's stove and the description of the exotic foods served to the Tsar and Tsarina during their visit to Paris. The narrator wants to tell everyone in line about the beauty of that encounter, as if that will change the crowd's view of the world, but he knows it is hopeless. He doesn't have the language to spin the tale.

Chapters 3 & 4 Analysis

In this section, the Siberian Suitcase is introduced as an item of great history and intrigue for the narrator. Charlotte has managed to keep the suitcase with her wherever she moves in life, which is surprising since she's clearly had an exciting and volatile life. The suitcase will come into importance later in the novel. In this chapter, the narrator has his first experience with the duality of language. In the poem his grandmother reads to him, he first hears his native Russia being discussed through the eyes of Frenchman and it is as though he is seeing his homeland for the first time. Because he is so interested, the narrator breaks into the suitcase thinking he can solve the riddles of history on his own, unaided by his grandmother's stories. He finds, however, that he can't quite figure it out without her. This event foreshadows the duration of the novel where the narrator struggles to outgrow his dependence on Charlotte to understand his personal history, which creates the major tension of the novel.

With the story of Tsar Nicholas II, the reader becomes aware of Charlotte's romantic, skewed version of history. She desires to paint beautiful pictures of history for her grandchildren, which causes some emotional strife for the narrator when he discovers that his beloved Tsar Nicholas II is the same person as "Nicholas the Bloody" whom he reads about in his history books. The memory of Tsar Nicholas II also brings the banquet where he ate "bartavels and ortolans." Even though the narrator has no idea what these food items are, they capture his imagination and bring the stark difference between this succulent French society and the barren, communist society of Russia into the spotlight. While the narrator is being abused in the rations line, all he wants to do is to tell his fellow townsfolk about the beauty of the dinner party, knowing it will open their imaginations and given them a more beautiful view of the world, but he knows he doesn't have the language to tell that story.

Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

This chapter plunges back into the past with the death of Norbert, the narrator's great-grandfather. After his death, Albertine returns to France occasionally with her daughter, Charlotte, but never stays long. Her family can't understand why she would want to remain in Russia, especially since she has no money there. Albertine, it seems, had felt as if she were bound for Siberia, as if it was her destiny. Charlotte remembers that each time she and her mother had returned home, they had had less money than before and always resettled in a smaller apartment. She had been teased ruthlessly in school, both by her teachers and fellow pupils, and had been saddened to see her mother's dependence on morphine grow. In time, her mother had been completely lost to the world, caring only about her drugs which Charlotte had often gone to the chemists to purchase for her.

In time, Charlotte begins giving French lessons to the governor's snobby daughter in exchange for table scraps. And then one day, her mother appears in the doorway, hails a cab, and prepares for the two to leave for France immediately. The only thing they leave behind is the Siberian Suitcase, full of old photographs and newspaper clippings, which Albertine promises they would return for one day. Upon returning to France, Albertine tells her family she will return to Russia one last time, simply to put her Russian life to rest. Before her mother leaves, Charlotte pleads with her to check on the mice that had lived near the stove. Those are the last words Charlotte speaks to her mother, who never returns to France. At the time, Charlotte is eleven. For the rest of her years, Charlotte reviles her last words to her mother, and wishes she had thought of something cleverer to say.

Time passes, and Charlotte continues her life in France. When the war breaks out, Charlotte is given the opportunity to return to Russia on a Red Cross Mission. Upon her return, Charlotte recognizes nothing about her motherland. Everywhere she looks she sees starving children, men with the bodies of insects, and worse, cannibalism. It all becomes too much for her, and one day she decides to return home. She spends weeks bartering for bread, stealing seats on trains, and learning how to handle the local thieves. Often, Charlotte thinks she is dreaming, only to realize that she is moving through reality, and often she thinks she is living in reality, only to wake up and realize everything she has seen has been a dream. Finally, she makes her way, dreamily, to Boyarsk, the village of her childhood. On her way to her childhood home, she is stopped by a soldier who demands to see her travel papers. When they are in his hand, he refuses to return them. Charlotte doesn't put up a fight, but keeps on her way. When she comes upon her childhood home, an old woman is there chopping wood for the fire. Charlotte barely acknowledges her before pushing open the front door to warm her hands by the stove. When the old woman comes inside the house, it is immediately clear that the woman is Albertine, Charlotte's mother.

Chapter 5 Analysis

In this section, the reader gets to know a bit more about Charlotte's personal history. It is interesting to note that Charlotte's mother, Albertine, always thought she was bound for Siberia. In the end, she was, as morphine became her metaphoric Siberia. Again, the Siberian suitcase is referred to as a link to Charlotte's past. The reader learns that she begins to collect newspaper clippings at the encouragement of her uncle, and that this collection is her prized possession. The reader, along with the narrator, is left to wonder whether Charlotte has collected these stories because she has no friends in school and wants to create a history for herself, or if she collects them for another reason.

Throughout her history, it makes sense that Charlotte would cling to moments in her past, particularly when she had been destitute during the war, away from her family, witnessing terrible sights. The news of Charlotte joining the front lines of the war as a nurse proves to be an important element to the plot of the story although it won't return again until the last chapter of the novel. Here, it is clear that Charlotte sees many things that change her as a woman and force her to make some tough personal decisions. In this section, the narrator continues to create a sense of mystery and suspense regarding Charlotte's personal history, winding the reader up for the big reveal at the end of the novel.

In this section, the reader learns the first story of Charlotte's violent relationship with Russia. Albertine cares for Charlotte as best she can during wartime, but eventually, they want to leave and start afresh somewhere new. Charlotte goes to see the military ruler to ask for her traveling papers back. After a quarter-hour of listening to the ruler's bombastic political speeches, Charlotte demands her papers. Feeling disrespected, the ruler becomes violent, calling Charlotte a dirty spy and threatening to shoot her in the courtyard. Charlotte flees from the meeting, shaking, but still alive. In spring, Charlotte and Albertine beg through town and finally find work as day laborers for a Siberian farmer who says nhe will not pay them, but would give them bed and board in exchange for their work. At the end of the season, the farmer puts the two women on a cart back to town, and under the tarp has laid their earnings. When the women peel back the tarp, they are shocked to find three sacks of potatoes, two sacks of corn, a keg of honey, four enormous pumpkins, several crates of apples, beans, and other vegetables, ten hens, and an arrogant rooster. Two years later, Albertine is dead and Charlotte is married to her husband, Fyodor.

Chapters 6 & 7

Chapters 6 & 7 Summary

At dinner parties, the narrator often wonders why conversation drifts to discussions about Charlotte. After the children are put to bed, the adults often discuss Charlotte and her tales at length, but stop if one of the children wakes up and wanders into the room. This fact has always puzzled the narrator. The narrator considers two of Charlotte's childhood memories that have left a strong impact on him. The first is when Charlotte visits a group of young people in a village. The children there are very concerned with supernatural experiences and dare Charlotte to visit the cemetery at exactly midnight. They dare her to lay an object on a tombstone for them to investigate later. Charlotte unflinchingly agrees.

The other memory the narrator cherishes is of Charlotte's father, a reputable doctor who once heard from a patient that the peasants demonstrating in the square would soon be met with machine gun fire. As soon as the patient had gone, Charlotte's father jumped into his carriage and sped off to warn the workers. The narrator is struck by the fact that his great-grandfather, a man who was wealthy and well-respected, had been concerned with the safety of peasants, and strove to do something about it. In this section, through the exploration of these memories, it is hinted that Charlotte's husband, Fyodor, was arrested although his arrest is not explained. There is also some mystery introduced as it is noted that the characters all cease their conversations about Charlotte's past when her son, Sergei, is around. In Chapter Seven, the narrator returns to Charlotte's house for the summer. On the first night, she tells the narrator, who is thirteen at the time, that the French President, Felix Faure, had died in the arms of his lover, Marguerite Steinheil.

Chapters 6 & 7 Analysis

In this section, speculation about the secrets Charlotte is hiding continue to grow, particularly as the narrator is growing up and notices that people cease talking about his grandmother when he's around. He is still too young to understand the nonverbal communication happening between the adults, but clearly picks up on the tension in the room. It is interesting to note that while all the adults gossip about Charlotte's past, they do not do so when Charlotte's son, Sergei, is in the room, which leaves the reader and the narrator wondering what Sergei has to do with Charlotte's secrets. The other topic of conversation common amongst the adults at nighttime is the war. Regularly, the men argue about which facet of the armed forces is more valuable than the others. Through these conversations, the narrator realizes that Charlotte makes the Russians uncomfortable. She had a choice to join them, with all their history of violence and bleakness and loss, which makes them evaluate their country and its history with fresh eyes - the eyes of a foreigner.

The story of French President Felix Faure's death in the arms of his lover has a deep impact on the narrator because he recognizes that there is no other grandmother he knows who would engage in a talk referencing sex with their thirteen-year-old grandson. Secondly, the image of a man dying in the arms of his lover has a very erotic impact on the narrator, who imagines the sexual encounter between the President and his mistress. In trying to recount the story to himself later, the narrator realizes the story cannot be told the same way in Russian. It only contains the layers of beauty in language in French.

Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The adults continue to discuss Charlotte and her life choices in the kitchen, only now that the narrator is fourteen-years-old, he is allowed to stay and listen as long as he remains silent. The adults don't understand why Charlotte would want to spend her life in Siberia when she could have stayed in France, but the narrator understands. He remembers hearing stories about Charlotte escaping through Russia with her young children, months after her husband, Fyodor, disappeared. Fyodor was arrested on Christmas, while he was dressed up as Santa Claus. He was released a few weeks later, but asked to undergo reintegration "into the party" in Moscow. Although the retraining should have only taken a few days, Fyodor did not return.

Months after Fyodor's disappearance, bombs begin to drop in Russia. Charlotte grabs her children and runs toward the train station. Ironically, the last train has left moments before their arrival, absurdly observing its usual timetable despite the flood of bombs being dropped. Charlotte's son, Sergei, notices a freight train being loaded up, and Charlotte throws her children onto it. Even though she trips and falls to her knees, Charlotte still manages to climb aboard the train. She is horrified to notice, however, that in her haste to leave the house she had accidentally grabbed the Siberian suitcase full of newspaper clippings instead of the suitcase she had packed with clothes and food. Later, the freight train passes a row of exploded train cars overflowing with mutilated bodies. Charlotte realizes that this is the train she and her children missed that morning: the last train to the East.

When the war breaks out, Charlotte begins work as a nurse on the front lines. The images she sees, particularly of the men who have lost both their arms and legs, haunt her nightmares. The only times these images leave her thoughts is when her daughter, the narrator's mother, falls ill with typhus, and when she receives word that her husband, Fyodor, is dead. When she hears this horrible news, Charlotte cannot bring herself to leave the hospital where she is working, and cannot face the children. When she does return home, she falls asleep near the stove and dreams of a peaceful day in France, walking through the streets with Fyodor.

The narrator recalls hearing terrible stories about the soldiers Charlotte saved in the war. Like the soldier whose leg was full of splinters when a bomb exploded as he was holding a wooden spoon, or the soldier whose injured leg was full of white worms, or the soldier who was self mutilating so he wouldn't have to return to the front lines. A year and a half after the war broke out, Charlotte receives a disturbing letter: a second notice of Fyodor's death. Having two death certificates, Charlotte assumes that her husband is still alive, and silently begins to wait for him.

Charlotte's waiting pays off when four years after he disappeared, Fyodor returns. Charlotte sees him walking down the street after she had been at the market buying

spices for dinner. The children had both moved away from their village, so she is alone when she sees him walking down the street. The two do not embrace or kiss when they see each other, but silently make their way back to the house and eat a meal together. Charlotte doesn't cry until she bathes Fyodor after dinner and realizes she doesn't recognize his body, which is now riddled with old scars. A year after his miraculous return, Fyodor dies from his old war wounds.

Chapter 8 Analysis

This section signifies the first change in the narrator's coming of age since he is now allowed to sit in the kitchen and listen to the adult conversation happening there. While he is in the kitchen, the narrator learns about Fyodor's arrest, one of the first mysteries introduced through Charlotte's stories: Fyodor's disappearance. The dramatic story that follows, about Fyodor's two deaths, his return to Russia, and his real death a year later, perhaps shed light on Charlotte's desire never to leave Russia. Instead of returning to France to start a new life, it is as though Charlotte has never left her state of waiting for her husband. It is clear that she never abandoned him when the world thought he was dead, so why should she abandon him now that his body is in the ground?

The scenes in this section are extremely violent and graphic. They show the extreme loss felt by the nation during the war, and show how Charlotte was shaped by these tragedies. Although she did her best to keep spirits high, it is no wonder that she filled her days, and her grandchildren's imaginations, with beautiful stories of France, depicting the land as almost fairy tale like in comparison to Russia. The fairy tale seems to have spilled over into Charlotte's life regarding her extreme luck in escaping the bombs of the war. It is somewhat unlikely that Charlotte and her family would be the only ones to escape during war time, and that she would accidentally grab the Siberian suitcase rather than the one filled with food, but the reader believes the tale since Charlotte has already been set-up as a somewhat magical character.

This section also perpetuates the mystery surrounding Charlotte's son, Sergei. Not only does he look like no one in his family, he also acts like no one in the family. While everyone seems to panic about the bombs being dropped around them, and rightfully so, Sergei is calm, completely in control amidst the chaos.

Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Upon returning to Russia, the narrator dives into books about France and French history, spending entire days lost in the dust-covered volumes of the public library. His interest in French history has taken his attention away from other childhood things like sports and movies, which has made him a target for bullies in his school. The only person who treats the narrator kindly is a young man in school everyone considers to be a dunce. He is two years older than the narrator but still in his class at school. This outsider, Pashka, is a fisherman who lives off his catches in the woods. As outsiders, the two young men gravitate toward each other and Pashka eventually begins inviting the narrator to join him on his fishing excursions in the woods. There, Pashka silently fishes while the narrator recounts some of his favorite stories of French history. Often, Pashka breaks though the ice where he is fishing and the narrator is able to save him by unwinding his scarf and using it as a rope. He knows that Pashka could probably save himself, but he tries to help in order to feel useful.

One day, however, Pashka nearly drowns for real. The ice off of which he is fishing off breaks in a large sheet and every attempt to hurl himself onto the remaining ice causes it to shatter. With much effort, the narrator helps pull Pashka to safety. After, Pashka lights a fire and strips off all his clothes to dry. While Pashka dries off, the narrator tells him a story of a young French boy sentenced to death by the executioners despite his age. In a youthful and naïve ruse, the young boy begs the executioner to let him run home, for he lived just around the corner, to deliver his watch to his mother, promising to return again straight afterward. The executioner guffaws at the boy's request, but lets him go. He is shocked to see, a few minutes later, the boy's pale face return to the execution wall to stand stock-still in front of the executioner shouting out, "Here I am!" When he hears this story, Pasha stumbles away from the fire and stands naked in the snow, wrapped only in a blanket. The confused narrator chases after him and discovers that Pashka is crying. Pashka demands to know what happens to the young boy - whether he is executed or not - but the narrator doesn't know; he had heard the story in a poem without an ending. But Pashka is irate, so the narrator lies and tells him that the boy is spared.

Chapter 9 Analysis

This section highlights the narrator's position as an outsider in his school. This is important to note because the entire novel surrounds the narrator's struggle to discover where he fits in in the world - is he Russian or is he French? In this section, the narrator clearly aligns himself with French history, turning his back on almost everything that is Russian. This struggle for identity affects every aspect of the narrator's life, including his schooling. Even when the narrator tries to fit in with his peers by spending one night

memorizing the names of the players of the bullies' favorite football team, he is seen as an awkward outsider who makes everyone else uncomfortable.

Luckily for the narrator, he is not the only outsider in town, and befriends the dunce, Pashka. Through his relationship with Pashka, the narrator learns much about himself and his passion: storytelling. After telling Pashka the story of the boy who is executed, the narrator feels a sense of magic in the air. Even though the initial poem was written a long time ago, and thousands of miles away, the story is still so powerful as to move a young Russian barbarian to tears, forcing him into the snow in bare feet. The narrator remembers this image and knows that this is the key to good storytelling - the human connection.

Chapters 10 & 11

Chapters 10 & 11 Summary

The narrator begins to realize that his grandmother, Charlotte, has nothing else to teach him about France, because he has read everything he can find about French history and his own knowledge of France's historical events surpasses hers. Now that his older sister has moved to Moscow to continue her studies, the narrator feels guilty about his changed relationship with Charlotte, especially since he will be alone with her all summer. As a teenage boy, he is not concerned with fairy tales any longer and feels overwhelmed with thoughts about women. The narrator is particularly struck when he comes across a photo of three women dressed in tight black dresses, in the Siberian suitcase. He is struck by their sheer femininity, and his inability to access the women. As a teenage boy, he is attracted to the women and attempts to picture them nude. He is only able, however, to imagine the flaccid breasts of a homeless woman he had seen one day at the railway station. He runs to Charlotte and demands that she tell him stories once again in the ways that captured his imagination as a child. Charlotte smiles shyly, and admits that the narrator now knows everything. She has no more stories to tell. At the end of the summer, the narrator catches Charlotte's eye out of the train window before it pulls away. The two do not speak or gesture to each other and the narrator realizes they no longer have the need for words.

Soon after returning home, the narrator's mother leaves to go to the hospital where she undergoes some routine tests. His sister arrives home from boarding school even though it is not school holiday. His father suddenly becomes vacant, staying up all hours of the night watching television. And then family members begin arriving. All the while, the narrator takes to the streets, enjoying the newfound freedom of being able to stay out late without having to be accountable to anyone. Then, one day at school, he hears a murmuring among the other school children and one finally shouts out that the narrator's mother is dead.

After the funeral, the narrator becomes transfixed with the stories of Beria, the Russian leader, who had stalked young women in the streets. Driving slowly in a black car, he chose which woman was most sexually attractive to him, abducted her, raped her, and then killed her. The narrator is confused and perplexed regarding his feelings for Beria: part of him is disgusted with Beria's actions, akin to a wild animal's. The other half, however, respects that the man went after what he wanted and wasn't accountable to anyone. Even though he feels this way, the narrator is overwhelmed with guilt for thinking this way.

Also after the funeral, his aunt, his father's sister, moves in with the family. While entertaining a guest one night, the aunt blurts out the truth about Charlotte's secret: while walking through the streets of Siberia, she was attacked by a group of soldiers and gang raped on the streets. By six or seven men. After they finished with her, they

shot her in the head. Thankfully, Charlotte lived through the attack but later discovered she was pregnant.

Chapters 10 & 11 Analysis

In this section, the relationship between the narrator and his grandmother has changed completely, due in part to the narrator's age since he is now entering his teenage years. He doesn't feel like he can connect to Charlotte's fairy tale stories about France any more because he knows the gritty truth about French history thanks to his studies. When Charlotte attempts to create the magical world of Atlantis for the narrator, he finds himself drifting off, not listening to the stories, imagining another world, further away from his grandmother than he's ever felt before. Charlotte recognizes the change, too, and soon their conversations about the past disappear. Instead, the two now discuss trivial things like the weather and the trains. The narrator is coming of age, leaving his childhood behind and maturing into adulthood. While this is an exciting prospect, the narrator cannot help but feel depressed that his knowledge of the world has erased much of the mystery and magic of his childhood. For example, the narrator now knows the ingredients to make proper "bartavels and ortolans," the mysterious royal dish that so captured his imagination as a child. Now, to the narrator, they are simply game birds garnished with mushrooms.

There is a moment, however, after repeatedly seeing the flaccid breast of the homeless woman on the trains, that the narrator begs Charlotte to bring him back to his childhood, but she coyly refuses. Later, the narrator's false adulthood is tested again when his parents die. When one of his classmates shouts out that the narrator's mother is dead, suddenly all the strange events from the last few days come together and the narrator realizes that his mother must have been dead for several days with none of the adults wishing to tell him what happened. He is overcome with a debilitating sense of guilt that while his mother was dying, he was fantasizing about faraway lands, enjoying his newfound freedoms. Soon after, the narrator learns the truth about Charlotte's rape. Hearing this brings back terrible images of Beria and the narrator's struggle with whether or not he hates this man. After hearing the news of Charlotte's rape, the narrator feels sick, even going so far as to say that he hates himself. He begins to slap himself in the face, beating himself up until he is swollen and bloody. Then he throws open the window and says, "I am Russian."

Chapters 12 & 13

Chapters 12 & 13 Summary

The narrator begins learning sequence movements with his class, preparing to protect their fatherland, Russia, if war ever were to breakout. The narrator finds that mindlessly following orders is calming to him after the death of his parents and the news of Charlotte's rape. In these moments, someone else is clearly in control. During these sequence movements, the narrator becomes attracted to a young fifteen-year-old girl with russet colored hair. He finds her movements as she dismantles and reassembles Kalashnikov guns profoundly attractive. When he watches as tanks roll in, he feels profoundly jealous of the soldiers who stand at attention. The narrator believes that no outside thoughts can penetrate these serious soldiers' minds. They have a clear stream of thinking, "simple and direct, like the orders they executed" (Page 154).

In joining the crowd and doing what he is told, the narrator also finds that he is slowly being accepted into the small society of his school peers. He finds that within the crowd, there are three smaller cliques of people: the proletariats, the tekhnars, and the intelligentsia. Now that the narrator isn't hiding alone in the library with his books, his stories have life again. He finds that he must construct the same story three different ways to meet one of his three different audiences, but suddenly, he is popular as an accomplished story teller. This comes crashing down, however, when Pashka becomes jealous of the narrator's newfound attention. While the narrator is telling a story one day, Pashka interrupts to say that he's not telling it right. The narrator is embarrassed, but carries on. The audience, as usual, ignores what Pashka has said.

Soon after, all the teenagers in town make their way up to the Mountain of Joy where there is an enormous open-air dance floor. Overwhelmed by the undulating bodies around him, the narrator has an embarrassing moment where he presses his body against the soft breasts of his dance partner and insults her. After, he hears a voice calling him from up in the trees and spots Pashka up in the canopy. Even though he has been avoiding Pashka since being allowed into "regular" social society in school, the narrator is desperate for escape and climbs up with him. They sit for a while and Pashka begs him to stay and look at the stars, but the narrator jumps out of the tree as soon as his friends are ready to go home, before they can see him socializing with a dunce. Clearly, Pashka is hurt by this.

Later, Pashka invites the narrator to come with him to the boat docks to see something. The narrator reluctantly agrees. They make their way to a secluded area of the boat docks and watch with wonder as a group of soldiers take turns having sex with a single prostitute. Because they are watching through the portholes of a boat, the prostitute's body is chopped up, in that the narrator can only see her top half or bottom half at one time. He is shocked that her top half looks very normal; her face is peaceful, and she even picks mindlessly at her red fingernail polish, but her bottom half is rocking violently

as these soldiers thrust into her. The narrator finds it impossible to reconcile these two halves belong to the same person.

Soon after, the narrator returns to the Mountain of Joy with his friends. Afterward, they all become extremely drunk and couple off. The girl with the russet-colored hair is left single, so the narrator invites her with him to the boat dock. There, they fumble through making love although it is clear that the narrator has no idea what he's doing. After, the girl quickly leaves. The narrator follows her, feeling deeply connected to her, but she is horrified at the thought of speaking with him. At school the next day, the narrator overhears some of his friends discussing how the girl claimed her partner the night before had no idea what he was doing and didn't know how to make love. Deeply embarrassed, the narrator sets out for Saranza the next day.

The narrator arrives in Saranza with every intention of blaming Charlotte for his inability to associate with his Russian heritage, thanks to her romanticism of French history. When he arrives, he waits for Charlotte to unleash her French sentimentality so he can lambast her for his loss of Russian pride. As his time in Saranza progresses, however, he realizes that Charlotte's day-to-day life outside of her grandchildren's summer visits, is far different than the life the narrator remembers; she eats simple meals and spends her days working on her sewing. She isn't even filled with stories, as she is in the summer. Soon after the narrator's arrival, Charlotte tells him a story of the time she was attacked by the samovars while going to the market. One approached her looking for spare change, and soon a pack had surrounded her. Charlotte handed one samovar some money, but it was stolen from him by another samovar. The first samovar then pulled a knife and stabbed the other. Soon there was pandemonium as the samovars fought and slashed at each other. Charlotte realized in that moment that the samovars weren't fighting for the money, but to "be revenged on life" (Page 181). In these moments, Charlotte claims she feels like an outsider. While she had tried to help the samovars, she had seen many other people gathering around to gawk and laugh.

Over the time of his stay with Charlotte, the narrator does eventually get his stories. He learns that the soldier who handed Charlotte the Verdun when she was younger was in fact Charlotte's first love. He handed her the stone standing on the train platform hoping to see her again someday; he never did. He also learns more about Charlotte's rape. After she was shot in the head, she managed to escape by following a mortally wounded deer across the barren desert in search of water. When the animal lay down, Charlotte nestled into its warmth. It died sometime in the night, but its body managed to keep Charlotte warm enough to survive until she was discovered the next day. Her first child, Sergei, was a product of the rape, but her husband, Fyodor, treated him like his own son.

Chapters 12 & 13 Analysis

In learning about Russia following his parents' death and the news of Charlotte's rape, the narrator simply wants to tune out his own control in life. He wants to follow someone else's orders, mindlessly, like a lemming. This would allow the narrator to stop thinking

about all the pain in his life and what he could have done to stop it. In the moments where the narrator is learning about the Russian military, he feels as though he is coming back to life, and that he can feel his French heart atrophying and his Russian heart blooming. In the narrator's excitement to have a new set of friends, he stops hanging around Pashka and ignores him when he speaks. Only after Pashka confronts the narrator about his shoddy storytelling does the narrator realize that a crucial element is missing from his stories: the human element that had felt so profound when Pashka had been his audience. He knows, in that moment, that there is no language to convey the same emotional connection to his new audience as there had been for Pashka.

When Pashka takes the narrator to the boat dock where they watch the prostitute having sex with the soldiers, the narrator is profoundly impacted by the view of the prostitute's body chopped up by the portholes of the boat. He finds it impossible to reconcile that these two halves belong to the same person, much like he finds it impossible to reconcile the French and Russian sides of himself. He has not yet found a way to make the two halves work together; he still feels as if he must be solely French or solely Russian. This tension leads to the narrator unexpectedly boarding a train to Saranza to confront his grandmother about her silly romantic stories. Upon his arrival, however, the narrator realizes that Charlotte tells her stories in the summer as her way of remembering her language and culture. He suddenly feels that Charlotte's life in Saranza is very fragile, and one that needs protecting.

Chapters 14 & 15

Chapters 14 & 15 Summary

The narrator spends twenty years in France after leaving his grandmother, Charlotte, for the last time. He receives very little news from Saranza. The narrative jumps twenty years into the future, when the narrator has just quit his job at the radio station and wanders around France without purpose. He quickly runs out of money and considers suicide. While he is wandering through town hoping to die, it begins to rain and the narrator seeks shelter in a family tomb in the cemetery. He lies down with his head resting on a velvet prie-dieu, and feels comfort. He spends days living in the tomb, even calling it "home" at one point, leaving only to scrounge for bread and to wash. He feels himself descending into madness, and he wanders the streets, paranoid, sure someone is following him. When he turns around, he sees an old woman with gray hair wearing a long coat. He is not sure if the woman is really there or if she is an illusion. Suddenly, the narrator is overwhelmed with memories of Charlotte's stories and feels like for a moment, in his childhood, Charlotte had given him the ability to feel eternal through her memories. After this revelation, he scrounges up enough money to buy a notebook and spends his days in the tomb writing down Charlotte's biographical notes. He is overcome with a sudden urge to find out whether or not Charlotte is still alive, and if he can somehow bring her back to France.

The narrative jumps again, three years in advance, and it becomes clear that the narrator has published his first book. It had initially been rejected by publishers who thought a Russian should not be writing in French, but the narrator then invents a translator, and rewrites the manuscript in both French and Russian. The book is hailed as a massive success. While he is contemplating the success of his book, the narrator remembers something Charlotte said to him when he was just a small boy, terrified by seeing his first coffin. She said - Do you remember the geese we saw flying overhead, in migration? When the narrator said yes, Charlotte continued saying, "Somewhere in distant lands they are still flying. It is only because our eyesight is too weak that we can't see them. It's the same with people who die" (Page 122).

Chapters 14 & 15 Analysis

The division the narrator feels between his two souls - his French soul and his Russian soul - finally comes to a head when he is living in France and contemplates suicide. Although he does not explicitly state what has fueled his depression, it is clear to the reader through the narrator's babbling what his true problem is, particularly when the symbolism of the narrator seeking refuge in a family tomb is noted. In his final fit of madness, when he feels as if he being followed in the streets, the narrator puts his hand up on a wall only to see that a plaque hangs there marking the water line from the great flood of 1910. Seeing this, the narrator is whisked back to his childhood memories listening to Charlotte tell stories on her balcony. The reader, too, is brought back to the

first chapter of the novel when Charlotte first opened up the world of her magical France, the underwater Atlantis, through her memories of the 1910 flood.

Charlotte's statement about the migrating geese, "Somewhere in distant lands they are still flying. It is only because our eyesight is too weak that we can't see them. It's the same with people who die" (Page 122), acts as foreshadowing to the news of her own death in the final chapters of the novel. Even though she has died, she continues "flying" through the book the narrator is writing about her life, memories, and stories.

Chapters 16 & 17

Chapters 16 & 17 Summary

The narrator hires a private detective, Mr. Bond, to return to Saranza for him to find out if Charlotte is still alive. Because the narrator had filed for refugee status when he left Russia the first time, he is allowed to travel anywhere in the world except for the USSR. Now, he must wait for his French nationalization papers to come through so he can apply for a French passport to visit Russia again. While "between two trains" in Moscow, Mr. Bond is able to find out that Charlotte is still alive and active. He encourages the narrator to go visit her, but he is having trouble with his paperwork; everything is taking longer than he expected. The narrator refuses to call or write Charlotte to tell her about his visit thinking it might jinx the process and she'll die before he can reach her. While he waits for his paperwork to come through, the narrator often has long, imaginary conversations with Charlotte, explaining how France has changed since she last lived here, what she should expect during her visit, and what the narrator hopes Charlotte will get out of her journey home.

The narrator finds a beautiful apartment he knows he can only afford for a few months, which is as far as he has thought ahead regarding Charlotte's visit. He then spends his days perusing antique stores, hoping to find objects to fill the room with a sense of history. He finds objects, like a lamp that casts the light just so, which would be perfect for Charlotte's stay. He imagines her happy in her new room, reacquainting herself with France, even though he knows she would never want to leave Fyodor's grave. In preparation for his dossier's arrival, the narrator even finds himself beginning to pray even though he had been raised as a strict atheist. He doesn't quite know how to pray and is somewhat embarrassed at his remedial prayers, but finds that this is the most important time of his life. Then, a package arrives in the mail from the Prefecture de Police. When he opens it, he immediately sees that he has been rejected. Someone, in an office somewhere, who doesn't know the narrator or his hopes for the future, has labeled the narrator "Unacceptable."

And then, months later, more news arrives: news of Charlotte's death. The narrator hears from Mr. Bond that Charlotte has passed away and left him an inheritance. The narrator learns that Charlotte, in fact, had died in September a year before he heard the news, which means that the entire time the narrator had been filing for paperwork and preparing an apartment for her, Charlotte was already dead. Devastated, the narrator collects his inheritance, and thinking he will find a farewell letter from Charlotte, is disgruntled to find that Charlotte has left him one last story - one the narrator thinks has nothing to do with himself or his family history, what he so hoped to gain from Charlotte in the last months of her life. In the story, Charlotte tells of a young woman who was taken to live in the Russian Gulags during the war. She was pregnant, and was given a few months respite when her baby was born. And then the narrator learns that this is not a story of fiction at all: As a nurse, Charlotte went to attend to this woman in the Gulag

and took the woman's child when she died two-and-a-half years later, crushed by a tractor. This woman, the woman in the man's shapka, was the narrator's mother.

Chapters 16 & 17 Analysis

In this final section, the narrator's struggle between two worlds comes to a close when he realizes that he has no real blood connections to France. Even so, it is clear that the bond between the narrator and his grandmother will never be broken, bringing to light the idea that "home is where the heart is." Perhaps it is not bloodlines at all that tie one to a motherland, but one's heart. When he hears this news, the narrator suddenly remembers a time when Charlotte noticed a real grapevine growing in the middle of a murdered clearing. She was overcome with joy in seeing this plant sprout from desecrated earth. Remembering this, the narrator feels an unbearable mixture of grief and joy, realizing that his life parallels the grapevine's. Yes, his birth mother is dead, symbolizing the desecrated earth, but he, like the grapevine, is still alive and thriving.

Characters

The Narrator

The narrator starts out the novel as a young boy enraptured with his grandmother's stories about her homeland, France. The narrator remains unnamed throughout the entire novel with only one exception near the end of the novel when his grandmother refers to him as "Aloysha." The entire novel centers around the narrator's perpetual struggle to figure out where he belongs in the world. Although he is drawn to his grandmother's stories about France, the narrator questions how a love of France might change his Russian heritage. While living in communist Russia after the second World War, the narrator is profoundly enamored with the luxurious stories of a democratic, wealthy France, and feels that the Russian people with which he is surrounded are simply unenlightened as to how beautiful their lives could be, so he sets out to discover a language that will convey French beauty to the Russian people. After his parents die, however, the narrator cuts all triviality from his life, including his love of France, opting instead for the mindless rule-following of the Russian military. For the narrator, there is a comfort in not thinking for oneself and feeling pride for an entire country's accomplishments rather than solely his own. With this change of heart, the narrator sets out to confront his grandmother about her sentimentality, only to find that his grandmother's romantic views of her French past should be treated delicately, even protected. The narrator continues to sway back and forth between feeling profoundly Russian and profoundly French, until hearing from his grandmother, after her death, that the narrator is actually only Russian. His mother was a prisoner treated by Charlotte during the war. She died and Charlotte took the baby away with her to be raised by her own daughter.

Charlotte Lemonnier

Charlotte Lemonnier is the narrator's grandmother, and the main storyteller of the novel. Charlotte is also sometimes addressed by her Christian name, translated to Russian, Sharlota Norbertovna. Charlotte was born in France in the early 1900s, in the village of Neuilly-sur-Seine before moving to Russia and marrying a Russian soldier named Fyodor. Even though her family always begged her to return home to France, Charlotte stubbornly wanted to stay in Siberia, feeling more at home there than she ever did in France. Even so, Charlotte keeps the France of her memories alive through the stories she tells her grandchildren when they come to visit. During these summers, Charlotte only speaks in French and pulls clipped newspaper articles, saved throughout her entire life, from her Siberian suitcase, one of the only items to travel with Charlotte wherever she lived. Through these stories, the grandchildren learn that Charlotte has lived through almost every major event in French and Russian history, including two wars. During the second World War, Charlotte worked as a nurse on the front lines, and saved many lives. During this time, her husband, Fyodor, was arrested and sent to a Gulag. Even though she received two letters proclaiming Fyodor's death, Charlotte refused to

believe he was gone. This faith was rewarded when, years later, Fyodor came walking home, covered in mud, scars, and open wounds. Charlotte cared for him, but Fyodor died from his war wounds a year later.

Another major moment in Charlotte's life is the moment of her rape. She is attacked by a group of men as she is walking down the street, gang raped, shot in the head, and abandoned as dead. Charlotte doesn't die from her injuries, however, and manages to survive by following an injured deer and using the warmth from its body to stay warm in the frigid Siberian night. She had been impregnated during her attack and she and Fyodor raise the son, Sergei, as if he is their own. Throughout the novel, Charlotte is seen as an almost mystical, magical character in tune with the needs, thoughts, and desires of her grandchildren, planning her stories around those needs.

Avdotia

Avdotia is the milkmaid in Saranza. She spends her days lugging a heavy milk churn around town selling her wares. She only rests when she stops at Charlotte's house and sprawls out on the hardwood floors. There, she and Charlotte spend a few moments discussing politics, farming, and various other topics while Avdotia rests her tired muscles.

Beria

Beria is the Russian leader who stalked young women walking down the street in his black car. He would follow them, choose which one was most sexually attractive to him, abduct them, rape them, and then kill them.

The Narrator's Sister

The narrator's sister is a nameless, faceless girl who is also present at Charlotte's home during the summers in Russia. Even though she is present, the sister doesn't do or say much in the story. Halfway through the novel, the sister leaves to attend school in Russia and is no longer mentioned in the novel.

Pashka

Pashka is the only friend the narrator makes in school while he is studying French history. Pashka is older than the rest of the kids in school and is therefore treated as a dunce. He likes to spend his time in the woods and is an avid ice fisher. Pashka regularly takes the narrator with him on fishing outings and is saved by the narrator when he falls through thin ice. Pashka also introduces the narrator to sexuality when he takes him to watch a prostitute having sex with some soldiers, an incident that has a strong impact on the narrator.

Norbert

Norbert is Charlotte's father, a respected doctor in Neuilly-sur-Seine. Not much is known about him except that he is wealthy. That wealth does not stop him, however, from rushing away from his practice when he hears that the police are lining up to slaughter protesting farmers in the streets.

Albertine

Albertine is Charlotte's mother and Norbert's wife, twenty-six-years his junior. After Norbert's death, Albertine slips into a deep depression with a chemical dependency on morphine that renders her completely useless to her daughter, Charlotte.

Vincent

Vincent is Charlotte's uncle who had worked as a journalist during the first World War, in which he eventually dies. Working as a journalist, Vincent often clips newspaper articles that intrigue him and he encourages Charlotte to do the same, which eventually leads to the creation of the Siberian suitcase, Charlotte's prized possession.

Fyodor

Fyodor is Charlotte's husband who is arrested on New Year's day while dressed as Santa Claus. After his arrest, Fyodor is sent to a "repatriation" camp that should have kept him away for a few weeks, but actually keeps him away for five years. During this time away, Charlotte receives two letters stating Fyodor's death, but she refuses to believe them. Years later, Fyodor suddenly returns home, covered in mud, scars, and open wounds. Even though Charlotte tries her best to care for him, Fyodor dies from his wounds a year later.

Sergei

Sergei is Charlotte's son born as the product of her gang rape in the desert. Even though Fyodor knows that Sergei is not his son, he still raises him and loves him as his own. Sergie looks darker than the rest of his family and is described as having a cool, even droning personality that doesn't change even in the most stressful situations.

Nikolai

Nikolai is the narrator's father who dies a few months after his wife's death. He is unable to cope with the loss of his wife and dies from a heart attack soon after.

Mr. Bond

Mr. Bond is the Russian businessman the narrator hires after living in France for twenty years, to find out whether or not Charlotte is still alive. During his initial visit to Russia, Mr. Bond hears that Charlotte is still alive, but when he returns months later, Charlotte is dead. It is Mr. Bond who contacts the narrator to tell him the news of Charlotte's death and to deliver the narrator's inheritance.

Objects/Places

Verdun

Verdun is the rock that Fyodor hands to Charlotte when he approaches her during the victory parade in Moscow. Later, Charlotte falls in love with and marries Fyodor, always treasuring the Verdun as the scrap of metal that brought them together. Later, when her grandchildren are playing with her rock collection, they throw the Verdun out the window, thinking it to be a worthless scrap of ugly metal.

Izba

An izba is a crowded dwelling where classic Russian babushkas live. The dwellings are usually dark, laden with a bitter, heavy, but not entirely unpleasant smell. The smell of the izba reminds the narrator of death, birth, love, and grief.

Western Glade

Western Glade is the building in Saranza where Charlotte lives. This area is characterized as trying to replicate the architectural fashion from a century ago. The building itself had been redecorated during the October Revolution, when all ornate architecture had been banned. Recently, architects have tried to reconstruct the ornate design of the building, but have been only faintly successful. Within Western Glade, Charlotte is the only non-Russian woman and she clearly sticks out, although the Russian babushkas do not pressure Charlotte to change.

The Siberian Suitcase

The Siberian Suitcase is a large suitcase which Charlotte has used throughout her entire life to carry around newspaper clippings and old photographs that hold significance in her life. When she and her mother, Albertine, leave Russia for Paris, this is the only object left behind. When she is reunited with the suitcase years later, Charlotte swears it will never leave her sight again, and it never does. It is from this suitcase that Charlotte spins the tales of French and Russian history that ignite her grandchildren's imagination.

Moscow

Moscow is the city where the narrator and his sister live when they are not visiting with their grandmother. In Moscow, the family still lives on rations and struggles to survive in this post-war city.

Boyarsk

Boyarsk is the village Charlotte where grows up and also where she returns to be reunited with her mother at the age of twenty.

Paris

Paris is the city where Albertine's family lives. Whenever Albertine and Charlotte come to visit, her family cannot understand why they would want to leave Paris, the most beautiful city in the world, to return to Siberia. It is in Paris where Albertine deserts her daughter, leaving her to be raised by relatives, while she returns to Russia.

Au Ratafia de Neuilly

The Au Ratafia de Neuilly is the cafe Charlotte conjures up for her grandchildren when telling them about the streets of Paris. At the Au Ratafia de Neuilly, patrons are served their drinks in silver scalloped dishes. The grandchildren cannot imagine such elegance as they are growing up in communist Russia, where there are only a handful of bars that all serve the same four or five drinks in thick glass mugs.

The Pont-Neuf Bag

The Pont-Neuf Bag is the bag a young Charlotte is dared to leave on a cemetery tombstone at exactly the strike of midnight.

Samovar

A samovar is a soldier who has lost both his arms and legs in battle and stares at the world with glinting, freakish eyes. The narrator describes a samovar as, "a soul imprisoned in a lump of amputated flesh; a brain detached from its body, a feeble gaze trapped in the spongy stuff of life" (Page 99).

Mountain of Joy

The Mountain of Joy is the name of the enormous open-air dance floor situated on the top of a hill high above the Volga. This is where the narrator meets the russet-haired girl, and also where he loses his virginity to her. The event, however, is not what the narrator had dreamed, because the girl wants nothing to do with him afterward and even spreads vicious rumors about his inability to make love.

Saiga

The saiga is a desert antelope with very large nostrils that is mortally wounded on the same day that Charlotte is raped. Charlotte manages to stay alive after the rape by following the wounded deer across the desert, toward water, and nestling into its body after its death to stay warm that Saharan winter night.

Themes

Duality

All throughout the novel, the narrator struggles with the duality of his nature, both Russian and French. Although the narrator understands that both of these lineages have made important impacts on his character, he doesn't know which nationality is his. This duality of nature is first introduced through the symbol of the two mating hawk moths at the opening of the novel. Even though he is just a boy, the narrator watches with interest as the two moths, which he initially views as one very large moth, split in two. In that moment, he realizes that they had been joined in love, or at least the act of love making, and have split into two unique, whole beings. In a way, this parallels the narrator's own making, since he considers himself to be the product of French and Russian histories that have joined in an act of love, and he is the product. Although the narrator is proud of his dual-nationality, that pride comes with a price. For the majority of the novel, the narrator struggles to figure out where he belongs.

The imagery of duality is again introduced when, as a young boy, the narrator witnesses a prostitute having sex with a group of soldiers. Watching this act through the tiny portholes of a boat's windows, the narrator is only able to take in half of the prostitute's body at a time: either her top half, which appears very calm, even bored, as the prostitute picks old polish off her fingernails, or the bottom half, which is being violently penetrated by the soldiers. The narrator is very struck by this image and struggles to reconcile how these two disparate halves could possibly belong to the same person. It is the same mentality, it appears, as the narrator's struggle to reconcile how the two halves of his nationality: his French half and his Russian half, could belong to the same person.

Finally, the narrator struggles with his duality one last time when he hears about Charlotte's rape. Hearing the news of her violent rape, the narrator immediately has flashbacks of the stories he had heard of Beria during the war. Beria had driven around town in a black car, searching for attractive women out the window. When he had seen one, he would call to have her kidnapped, then he would rape her and kill her. Growing up, the narrator had always had mixed feelings about Beria. One half of him is absolutely sickened by Beria's mistreatment of women, but the other half almost admires the man for going after what he had wanted without apologizing to anyone. After hearing of Charlotte's rape as a teenager, the narrator is overcome with self-loathing for ever admiring Beria. The conflict of his duality comes bubbling to the surface as the narrator punches and slaps himself in the face, until he is bloody and swollen, desperate to figure out where he belongs in the world.

Language

Throughout the novel, the narrator considers language as his tool to access the various worlds his nature inhabits. It is through his grandmother Charlotte's language that the narrator is first introduced to his French heritage. Through her stories, the world of Paris rises up and takes hold of his imagination, and he often compares this nearly-lost city of Paris to the mythical Atlantis. On page 32, the narrator discovers the key to unlocking this Atlantis: language. "Language, that mysterious substance, invisible and omnipresent, whose sonorous essence reached into every corner of the universe we were in the process of exploring. This language that shaped men, molded objects, rippled in verse, bellowed in streets invaded by crowds, caused a young tsarina who had come from the other end of the world to smile... But above all throbbed within us, like a magical graft implanted in our hearts, already bringing forth leaves and flowers, bearing within it the fruit of a whole civilization. Yes, this implant, the French language."

When he realizes that language is what unlocks mysterious worlds to others, he is desperate to share powerful images, scents, tastes, and feelings with those around him, particularly those who are living in the bleak, post-war world of communist Moscow. After a terrifying incident outside the rations stand, the narrator claims that, "Instead of anger toward the people who pushed me out I now felt a surprising compassion toward them: for by slightly screwing up their eyes, they could not gain access to that day with its fresh scents of seaweed, its cries of gulls, its veiled sun... I was seized by a terrible desire to tell everybody about it. But how to tell it? I would need to invent a language that did not yet exist. For the moment I only knew two words: bartavels and ortolans..." (Page 41). Finding a way to meld his two worlds through language, the way Charlotte did all throughout his youth, becomes the narrator's mission in the novel.

For the rest of his life, the narrator struggles to find the language to tell the stories of France - stories that capture his imagination and lead him to believe there is beauty in the world - not only to a bleak communist Russian audience, but to the rest of the world. The only time when the narrator comes close to reaching his goal is when he tells his stories to Pashka, the dunce, who has an extreme emotional reaction to the stories. Through this experience, the narrator realizes that what is needed in language is the human connection. Although he tries to reach out to various audiences in his adulthood, even at the end of the novel, when there are no more mysteries for the narrator to solve, the novel ends with the line, "What I still had to find were the words to tell it," symbolizing the fact that even though he has dedicated his life to storytelling, he will never be able to connect with France and its stories the way Charlotte did when he was a boy.

The Compression of Time

In order for Charlotte to tell the history of France with the sense of immediacy that she shares her stories with her grandchildren, it is necessary for her to compress decades of time and history. Charlotte is extremely adept at this skill of storytelling, and regularly

draws stories from her own past, her uncle's past, her mother's past, and the stories passed on from generations before her, but each of the stories is retold in a way that enraptures the children, and the readers of the novel. It seems to be all the audience members, that Charlotte had been present at each of France's major historic events, although that is clearly impossible. Through the power of storytelling and Charlotte's ability to compress time, the images of France's history become more vivid and have a strong impact. When considering this, the narrator claims that, "The exact chronology mattered little! Time in Atlantis knew only the marvelous simultaneity of the present" (Page 79). This compression of time is repeated again when Charlotte begins work as a nurse on the front lines during the war. She recognizes, even then, that the flux of soldiers she sees everyday represent innumerable destinies and that the floors of the hospital have brought together a nation's worth of history: "her hospital, with its jumble of hundreds of soldiers, coming from all fronts, condensed innumerable destines, brought together so many personal histories" (Page 99). It is no wonder then, that if this moment had such impact on Charlotte, she would struggle to tell the atrocities of the war without compiling the various stories into one, larger image of pain.

The theme of compressed time and histories plays well into the structure of the novel which is told through a variety of dreamy lenses that seem to jump, without warning, through history and time. Even though there is a clear arc of the narrator's coming-of-age, the reader experiences this personal growth through Charlotte's stories of Beria, Tsar Nicholas II, the Russian soldiers during the war, and even through her own life's experiences. In this novel, all humanity and history seem to be muddled through one woman's imagination, ensuring that the structure, and the message of history being subjective rather than factual, is felt emotionally rather than understood cognitively.

Style

Point of View

This novel is told with first-person limited omniscience narration from the point of view of an unnamed, teenage male narrator who gradually comes of age into manhood throughout the novel. This first person point-of-view is integral to the novel since the entire text surrounds this narrator's struggle to form his own self-identity, questioning whether he is mostly French or mostly Russian. This intimate look into the narrator's thoughts and fears throughout this process of self-discovery provides the majority of the tension in the novel. This point-of-view also allows for Charlotte, the grandmother, to be cast in a mysterious, almost magical light, because the reader only meets Charlotte through the narrator's child-like memories of her.

Even though the unnamed narrator is the point-of-view character in the novel, the point-of-view sometimes shifts during Charlotte's stories and the reader leaves the narrator's head and seems to float above historical events such as the banquet between the French President and Tsar Nicholas II, and particularly when hearing about Charlotte's past, including her rape, her marriage, and her time working on the front lines of the war. This shift in point-of-view could have been confusing for the reader, but because of the dream-like quality of storytelling in the novel, usually happens without tripping up the reader.

Setting

This novel is split between two settings: France and Russia. For the first half of the novel, the young narrator, growing up in communist Russia during the 1960's and 1970's spends his summers visiting his grandmother in the Russian village of Saranza, where she lives in an old izba, or Russian village, near the Steppe. At Charlotte's izba, there are a collection of small, dark apartments surrounding a courtyard where the babushkas sit gossiping on park benches during the day. Charlotte's tiny apartment has a balcony which overlooks the streets, an important prop for her summer storytelling. The izbas are typically described as dark dwellings with cluttered corridors that have the overwhelming "bitter, heavy, but not totally unpleasant smell ... of the old life, dark and very primitive in the way it welcomed death, birth, love, and grief" (Page 19). The Russia to which the narrator belongs, however, is equally bleak but less welcoming. The narrator recalls standing in rations lines for food and feeling as if there is no beauty in his surroundings.

The novel is interspersed with other settings, however. Most of these settings are in tiny villages throughout France, the way Charlotte remembers them from her childhood. Although these settings aren't "real," in that they're heavily romanticized and sentimental, they are extremely important settings to the novel as a whole. The French villages of Charlotte's childhood are described as rich, luxurious, even dainty towns with

silver teacups and extravagant meals. These descriptions of France capture the narrator's imagination and lead him to live in France for twenty years during his adulthood. It is interesting, then, that while the narrator is living in France, there is very little description of the landscape, only minimal description of his living arrangements, first in the cold stone family tomb of the French cemetery and then the tiny expensive apartment overflowing with antiques purchased for Charlotte's amusement.

Language and Meaning

The language of this novel is extremely academic and dreamy. Many readers may struggle to understand the complex sentence structures and advanced vocabulary. This difficult structure does not let up, from the first page to the last, which will certainly alienate many readers. If the readers can crack through the intimidating structure, the language does add a great depth to the story, particularly when highlighting one of the central themes in the narrator's struggle: finding the language to tell his grandmother's stories. It is interesting to note, however, that the narrator specifically claims "human connection" is the key to good storytelling, but the language of this first-person novel makes it somewhat difficult for readers to connect with the narrative.

The language of the prose is meant to elicit a dream-like quality from the reader, which leads to lyric passages that seem to flow into each other strengthening the theme of condensed history. Charlotte's stories, and the novel itself, meld together histories of famous historical figures with the histories of the characters, creating a fluid narrative of history, both national and personal. However, this ornate language sometimes gets in the way of simple narration, and key plot moments are easily lost in vast descriptions causing the reader to have to reread certain passages in order to figure out plot elements that have been obscured in the language.

Structure

The novel is broken down into four sections that, on the surface, seem to have been put into place arbitrarily. Upon a closer read, the audience may notice that the novel is broken into sections based on key moments in the narrator's relationship with his grandmother. The first section focuses on his dream-like admiration of Charlotte's stories, where the narrator is simply soaking up the images and beauty in Charlotte's stories. The second section occurs starkly when the narrator discovers that Charlotte sometimes withholds information in her stories; the first chapter of the second section starts with the line, "That summer I felt extremely nervous about encountering the tsar again" (Page 73), because the narrator already knows that Tsar Nicholas II will become "Nicholas the Bloody" later in his life, and won't remain the powerful, jovial tsar of Charlotte's stories. The third section occurs when the narrator realizes that he has completely outgrown Charlotte's stories and that he now knows more about French history due to his studies than Charlotte does. In the third section, the narrator focuses more on his Russian heritage rather than the magic of his French heritage, in a way, turning his back on Charlotte completely. The fourth and final section of the novel

focuses on the narrator's deep desire to fix what has been broken in his relationship with Charlotte, desperately trying to find Charlotte and bring her back to the magic of her French childhood.

Although the language of the novel is complicated, the plot of the novel is quite simple: a young boy coming-of-age in communist Russia struggles to discover his own self-identity within two strong cultural histories. Throughout this plot, the boy encounters various personal histories, those of historical figures and of his family members, that help him form his self-identity. The pace of the novel is extremely slow since the entire plot takes place in the boy's head with no real forward momentum, and with the heavy reliance on long descriptive passages rather than direct dialogue and action.

Quotes

"On our balcony we heard the sleepy silence of flooded Paris. The lapping of a few waves when a boat went by, a muffled voice at the end of a drowned avenue. The France of our grandmother, like a misty Atlantis, was emerging from the waves" (Page 12).

"Language, that mysterious substance, invisible and omnipresent, whose sonorous essence reached into every corner of the universe we were in the process of exploring. This language that shaped men, molded objects, rippled in verse, bellowed in streets invaded by crowds, caused a young tsarina who had come from the other end of the world to smile... But above all throbbed within us, like a magical graft implanted in our hearts, already bringing forth leaves and flowers, bearing within it the fruit of a whole civilization. Yes, this implant, the French language" (Page 32).

"This last thought seemed to me so strange that I stopped repelling my tormentors' attack and turned toward the window, beyond which lay the snow-covered city. So I saw things differently! Was it an advantage? Or a handicap, a blemish?" (Page 39).

"Instead of anger toward the people who pushed me out I now felt a surprising compassion toward them: for by slightly screwing up their eyes, they could not gain access to that day with its fresh scents of seaweed, its cries of gulls, its veiled sun... I was seized by a terrible desire to tell everybody about it. But how to tell it? I would need to invent a language that did not yet exist. For the moment I only knew two words: bartavels and ortolans..." (Page 41).

"The ones crouched near the door would open it and hold the child above the footboard while it did its business. This passing down the line seemed rather to amuse them: they smiled, touched by this little creature wordlessly allowing itself to be handled in this way, moved by its very natural urge in this inhumane universe..." (Page 53).

"It was in picturing this woman's handbag amid the crosses, under the Siberian sky, that I began to have a feeling for the incredible destiny of things. They traveled; beneath their commonplace exteriors they logged the different periods of our lives, linking moments that seemed very far apart" (Page 67).

"The choice of events was more or less subjective. Their sequence was chiefly governed by our feverish desire to know, by our random questions. But whatever significance, they never escaped the general rule: the chandelier that fell from the ceiling during the performance of Faust at the Opera immediately unleashed its crystalline explosion in all the auditoriums of Paris" (Page 78).

"And besides, this young Frenchwoman had the advantage of concentrating within her life span the crucial moments in the history of our country. She had lived under the tsar and survived Stalin's purges; she had come through the war and witnessed the fall of so

many idols. In their eyes, her life, traced against the background of the empire's bloodiest century, took on an epic dimension" (Page 88).

"Earlier there was that hell of the burned-out towns: a few hours later - this horse, browsing on the dew-laden grass in the cool of the night. This country is too big for them to conquer" (Page 96).

"It was during the winter that I became aware of a disconcerting truth: to harbor this distant past within oneself, to let one's soul live in this legendary Atlantis, was not guiltless. No, it was well and truly a challenge, a provocation in the eyes of those who lived in the present" (Page 106).

"No sooner did I seek to return to the Atlantis of our youth than a learned voice intervened: I saw pages of books, dates in large print. The voice began to comment, to compare, to quote. And I felt myself stricken with a strange blindness" (Page 116).

"Real life was the layer of stagnant water that, with a shudder, I had caught sight of at the bottom of the grave on the day of the burial. Under a fine autumn rain, they lowered the coffin slowly into the mixture of water and mud" (Page 139).

"I found it hard to believe that my life had once been made up of these dusty relics. I had lived without sunlight, without desire - in the twilight of books. In search of a phantom country, a mirage of a France of yesteryear, peopled with ghosts" (Page 152).

"In my cry I wanted to spill out these images over Charlotte. I awaited a response from her. I wanted her to explain herself, to justify herself. For it was she who had passed on to me this French sentimentality - her own - condemning me to live painfully between two worlds" (Page 173).

"Yet sometimes I tell myself that I understand this country better than the Russians themselves. For I have carried that soldier's face with me over so many years ... I have felt his solitude beside the lake" (Page 183).

"That's what I need. That impact, that encounter with metal, but much more violent. An impact that would shatter my head, my throat, my chest. That impact, and then instant, final silence" (Page 210).

"If I did not want to take her there it was because you could walk along the whole street without hearing a word of French spoken. Some saw the promise of a new world in this exoticism others, a disaster" (Page 227).

Topics for Discussion

Consider the moths the narrator witnessed mating at the opening of the novel. What was significant about the moths coming together? How might these moths be seen as a symbol for the duality with which the narrator struggles throughout the novel as a whole?

Discuss the narrator's relationship with his immediate family members. Why do you think his family, aside from his Grandmother Charlotte, are rarely mentioned in the novel? What affect does this absence have on the narrative, particularly when the narrator's sister, present in the first half of the novel, suddenly disappears from the text in the second half?

Discuss the nameless characters in the novel. Why might Andrei Makine have chosen to leave the majority of the characters in the novel nameless? In what situation does the reader finally learn the name of the narrator? What is significant about this moment?

Consider Pashka's role in the novel. What does Pashka's presence in the novel add to the themes of individuality and self-awareness? What lessons does Pashka teach the narrator about himself and his place in the world? Do you think Pashka acts as a foil to the narrator's character? Why or why not?

Discuss the face of the "petite pommes" that so enraptures the narrator at the opening of the novel. What does this face look like? Why is it profoundly French? What message does the author give the reader about the "petite pommes" when the narrator states that the woman in the men's shapka has a perfect "petite pommes?"

Discuss the influence school has on the narrator's own self-identity. How is the narrator treated by his schoolmates during his teenage years? Why might this treatment be significant to understanding the narrator's psyche as he ages? How does the treatment from his fellow students change once the narrator stops following his "French heart" and startis following his "Russian heart?"

Discuss the deaths of the narrator's parents. How do you think the narrator's mother died? What effect did the narrator's mother's death have on his life? What guilt does the narrator attach to his mother's death? How does this guilt shape the narrator's quest for self-identity? Then, discuss how the narrator's father died. Which death do you think had a stronger impact on the narrator? How can you tell?

After his parents' deaths, the narrator despises Charlotte for her overly-romantic stories of childhood. How does the narrator think these sentimental stories of the past have shaped his upbringing? Why does the narrator suddenly resent this sentimentality? In what ways does the narrator blame Charlotte for his behavior during the time of his parents' deaths? Do you think that blame is well placed? Why or why not? Why does the narrator's mind change after he rushes to Saranza to confront Charlotte about her childhood stories?

Discuss the use of historical figures such as Beria and Tsar Nicholas II to explore the narrator's self-identity. Why is the narrator initially so infatuated with the stories of Beria? In what ways are Beria and the narrator similar? In what ways are they different? How does the narrator's view of Beria change when he hears the news of Charlotte's death? What uncomfortable parallels does the narrator make between the story of Beria and the story of Charlotte's rape?

Discuss beauty in the narrator's mind. As he ages, the narrator becomes more and more interested in beauty and sexuality. How do these new topics of interest alter the way the narrator views and relates to his grandmother? How does the narrator feel when he realizes that his grandmother is still beautiful, and still a sexual creature? How does Charlotte help the narrator through this confusing age of discovering sexuality?

Discuss the use of violence in the novel, particularly in the scenes of war. What effect does this violence have on the novel as a whole? Why might the gritty reality of violence be needed to balance out the dreamy beauty of Charlotte's stories? What effect has seeing this violence had on Charlotte? What effect does hearing about this violence have on the narrator?

Discuss the difference between the two settings of the narrator's childhood - Communist Russia and Imaginary France. What is the same about these locations? What is different? Which landscape do you think has a larger impact on the narrator's childhood? How can you tell?

Discuss the narrator's journey to discover his self-identity. What do you think are the biggest hurdles the narrator has to overcome before he can "find himself." Why do you think national allegiance is such an important struggle for the narrator? In the end, what does the narrator learn about himself that he had not been expecting. How does this unexpected information change the way the narrator views himself and the world?