

The Industry of Souls Study Guide

The Industry of Souls by Martin Booth

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Plot Summary

Alexander "Shurik" Bayless is the main character in this story. He has lived for more than twenty years in the little village of Myshkino, in the Russian countryside. He is an Englishman, and a former prisoner of the Soviet gulag system who, decades earlier, was imprisoned for political crimes he did not commit. He spent twenty-six years in the labor camp, Sosnogorsklag 32, which is located in the Siberian hinterland. Upon his release, he does not return to England as might be expected. Instead, he searches in Russia for the relatives of a fellow prisoner and friend, Kirill. As Kirill lay dying in a mine accident, Shurik promises him that he will seek out his daughter, Frosya. When he is finally released, Shurik finds his way to Frosya's home, where she is living with Trofim, her husband, and their son. Together they welcome this stranger into their home when he tells them that he has "come from Kirill." Shurik never intends to make their home his permanent place of residence; but days turn into weeks, and weeks into years. There he has remained for more than twenty years. Finally, on the day of his eightieth birthday, an event is set to happen which may interrupt his idyllic existence after all this time. It is on this peaceful summer morning that the story essentially begins.

It is the morning of Shurik's eightieth birthday. He is expecting visitors from outside the village that evening - an unusual occurrence. Frosya and Trofim ask about these visitors. They are curious, knowing that Shurik, their beloved friend who has become a part of their family, must make an important decision about his life. He may, in fact, be leaving them. This distresses Frosya in particular. His decision about his future apparently hinges upon this upcoming visit by these two unknown outsiders. Shurik asks Frosya not to question him about this matter, as he must make up his own mind. He is not angry with her, but firm. He seems to be going through an internal crisis. He tells her again that he must keep his own counsel about the matter.

After breakfast, Shurik sets out to take his daily walk through the village. As he walks along on this mild summer day, he meets the people whom he has befriended over the years. Through his interaction with different people, portions of his life story are revealed. The twelve chapters of this story alternate between the present; as Shurik takes his walk, and the past; when he is a prisoner in Sosnogorsklag 32, the Soviet prison camp where he was imprisoned for twenty-six years. It is in this prison camp where Shurik first meets Kirill, Frosya's father. He is the leader of the seven-member work unit that Shurik is assigned to. As Shurik relates the story of his life in the camp, he becomes attached to these men in his work unit, and he eventually comes to regard them as brothers. They become his true family, in a sense. They tell stories together, laugh, cry, and suffer the pain of unlawful imprisonment while building camaraderie that helps them to survive the barren wasteland of Siberia. They spend most of their time toiling away underground in a coal mine, working under excruciating conditions. A change in scenery occurs at one point in the story, when they are driven out to the site of an archaeological dig where a Great Woolly Mammoth is being excavated. They come to the realization that there were people living here, in this frozen wasteland, thousands of years before. They pause to reflect upon their place in time and history. Shurik comes to the conclusion that they are all simply lost and adrift in the world, and



that the brotherhood he shares with his prison mates is one of the few things that matters. It is also one of the few things worth the pain of survival. Death surrounds them in many different forms. On the dig they notice a man who had apparently committed suicide, choosing to freeze to death rather than to go on. It is Shurik's friend, Kirill, however, who is instrumental in teaching Shurik what it takes to survive and, in fact, why the pain of surviving is worth it after all.

In the chapters that take place in the present, Shurik's rich and fulfilling life is revealed, as he contentedly wanders the familiar terrain of his adopted village. He spends a little time with many of his friends on that afternoon, the day of his eightieth birthday. He has a sincere love for the people there, and they for him. As he walks along, he thinks of the potential disruption to his life that may come with the arrival of these visitors from England. One is an official from the British embassy in Moscow, and the other is his cousin, Michael Tibble, whom he has never met. They arrive on schedule that afternoon, pulling up in a fancy black limousine. They have finally found him after years of searching. Michael Tibble wants Shurik to return with him to England, and live with him and his family. Shurik also learns from Michael, the fate of his parents after all these years. He thanks his cousin and appreciates what he has sacrificed in trying to find him; but his heart is set upon remaining in Myshkino. The bond that he forged with Kirill and its importance to him are too strong. It is there, in Myshkino, that he seems to have found himself, as well as a reason for living. The relationship with Kirill has lived on, even after Kirill's death. He indicates that, in being there with Frosya and Trofim, he has brought Kirill's spirit with him; and thus Kirill lives on through him. This is a comfort to Frosya. He feels no obligation, however; it is a feeling that comes from his heart. With deep sincerity, he wishes to remain there with them. It has given true meaning to his life.



Chapter 1

Chapter 1 Summary

Alexander "Shurik" Bayless wakes up at six o'clock on the morning of his eightieth birthday and begins to think philosophically about his life. At eight o'clock he hears an insistent knock on his door. It is Frosya, the woman in whose house he has lived for more than twenty years. She greets him with affection in her voice, and wishes him a 'Happy Birthday'. The day is August 14th. She has brought him a little package, which she presents to him with tears in her eyes. She tells him that she loves him. He hears the voice of Frosya's dead father, Kirill in his ear. It is an echo from the past. The voice is telling him to go to the house of his daughter, and to "..tell her that it was good." Shurik asks this ghostly voice what this means, and it responds by saying, "It is good to die by the hand of a man whose name you know."

Shurik gets up and eats the breakfast that Frosya has prepared for him. He decides that he will take a walk though Myshkino, his little adopted village, and greet the many friends he has there. Frosya asks Shurik about some people who are scheduled to arrive that day. Frosya knew about this because of the recent arrival of a letter. He replies that they will come at about five o'clock that evening. He tells her not to ask about them, but to trust in fate and destiny. As he finishes his tea, he picks up the letter and begins to think about the circumstances that led him to the home of Frosya and her husband, Trofim.

He recounts how it took him five weeks to make his way to their home after his release from the Soviet labor camp. On his way there he begged for food, having nothing and owning nothing but the clothes on his back. He shows up on their front porch with no warning, telling Trofim that his name is 'Alexander'. Trofim is suspicious and unfriendly to this stranger. Finally, Shurik tells Trofim that he has "come from Kirill Karlovich." Trofim changes his attitude after that. He calls for his wife, and Shurik is warmly received into the household.

Now Shurik folds the letter he has been reading and gazes out on the scene near the house: the beautiful birch trees, the raspberry bushes and the sunflowers. He looks out at the neighboring property owned by a widow, Vera Dorokhova, and thinks about her husband, whose decomposing body was found one day in the woods, half-eaten by wild animals. He muses on how this woman has a longing for him, but that he has no interest in her, or in any other woman. He prepares to take his daily walk.

Chapter 1 Analysis

With the recent arrival of a mysterious letter and the occasion of his eightieth birthday, Shurik begins to take an assessment of his life. The fact that he hears a dead man's voice (Kirill) whispering in his ear, indicates that this was an important person to him. So



important, in fact, that since his release from the gulag, Shurik has spent the remainder of his life living with this man's daughter and her husband, in essence becoming a part of their family.

The letter has indicated that someone is to arrive at the household at five o'clock that evening. This event seems to have a bearing of some kind on a decision Shurik will have to make about his future. The questions from Frosya about the visitors, however, are deflected and he keeps his thoughts to himself. It is a private affair that he will have to work out himself. Meanwhile, the daily walk that he will be making on this day seems to have an increased importance. He thinks about the people he knows in Myshkino, and the impact they have had on his life. He is aware that the arrival of the unnamed visitor, or visitors, might possibly change his life entirely.



Chapter 2

Chapter 2 Summary

Shurik is now many years in the past, a new arrival at Sosnogorsklag 32, which is the Soviet prison camp to which he has been assigned. (The chapters in this book alternate between the past in the gulag and the present in the town of Myshkino). A prison guard shouts at the new prisoners, who are lined up against the wall of the coal mine. They are several kilometers underground. Shurik has been assigned a number, B916, and is identified as being the only Englishman in the group. Another inmate identifies himself to the prison guard as 'Kirill Karlovich Balashov'. These two have a moment together where they are able to converse, and the beginning of a friendship unfolds. Kirill dubs him 'Shurik', telling him that this is short for Alexander. They take a walk together down a gallery of the mine, and Kirill begins to tell Shurik some engaging and funny stories.

Later in the day, during a rest period, Shurik describes his companions, whom he dubs "Kirill's Boys." There are five besides himself and Kirill, working together in Work Unit 8. They are Avel the Aviator, as he is called; Kostya; Ylli; Titian and Dmitri. Shurik describes the five and the so-called "crimes" the Soviet state has found them to be guilty of committing. He describes himself, Alexander Bayless, as a bachelor, a graduate of English Literature from the University of Durham, and a one-time representative (buyer) for a steel company. He was arrested by the Soviets while on a scrap-metal buying trip to Leipzig. He was charged with espionage and taken prisoner. He says that he was innocent of the charges. The Soviets explain his disappearance by reporting that he was killed in a tragic car accident. Shurik also describes Kirill, Froся's father. He has ended up in the gulag for rightly arresting a young Soviet officer for corruption; however, this young man also happened to be the nephew of a high-ranking Communist party leader.

About a month after his arrival in Sosnogorsklag 32, Shurik describes an episode involving the leader of the *blatnye*, or the criminal class inmates. This individual is named Genrikh, and he is described as a Muscovite thug. One night he grabs Ylli by the neck and slams his head against the stove, screaming that it is his fault the fire in the stove is not hot enough. Shurik feels ashamed that he does nothing to help Ylli, who is being abused as everyone stands by silently watching. Kirill explains to him later that he shouldn't feel ashamed, because he has just witnessed the exercise of authority and exploitation of power. It seems that it is innate to mankind, and it is similar to the exploitation of power exercised by world leaders such as Churchill, Eisenhower and DeGaulle. He says that there is nothing anyone can do about this, but that it just must be accepted as part of man's character. Kirill says that if you fight you die, but if you adapt, you live. This becomes a creed that Shurik lives by during his years of imprisonment in the gulag.

On another day in the mine, a bet takes place among a group of prisoners. This involves the seven companions of Work Unit 8 and the leader of Unit 39, Vachnadze,



who happens to be a gambling man. The clever group tricks him into losing a bet. Titian says, "Some you win, comrade, some you lose."

Chapter 2 Analysis

The beginning of the lifelong friendship between Kirill and Shurik begins here. It is the reason that many years later, Shurik has found himself a permanent member of Frosya's household. Kirill's advice and stories give Shurik the knowledge and the survival instincts he needs to outlast the gulag. He advises him that, in the face of certain kinds of adversity, you do not fight; but instead, you adapt yourself. This is the key to self-preservation in their situation. It is advice that Shurik takes to heart and never forgets. Another example of this is illustrated by the bet made among the prisoners one day. Vachnazdze is a character who makes a clumsy bet with some of the Shurik's friends. The moral of this little illustration is not to fight, but to outwit. "Some you win, comrade, some you lose," is an ironic statement pertaining to their situation and an axiom that can be applied to them all.



Chapter 3

Chapter 3 Summary

The story continues again in Myshkino, with the old man Shurik thinking that until today, he was beyond caring about what happens to him. After all, he has survived the horrors of the gulag. What else could affect him? But with the arrival of the letter, he muses that fate has intervened in his life, and that its hand is powerful. He admits that he would rather face death, than five o'clock that afternoon. Visitors from outside the community will arrive and he will be forced to make a choice about his life that he has been unwilling to face heretofore.

Shurik steps out on the lane that leads from Frosya's house to the rest of the village. Komarov appears at the door of his shed and calls to him. He invites Shurik into his shed, where his apple mill is located, and they talk. They see a big, gray spider in the corner and a wasp, which it has caught in its web. Instead of sinking its fangs into the wasp, the spider lets it go, snipping the web surrounding it and letting it drop to the ground. Komarov comments that even a spider knows when not to fool around with a wasp. Katya, Komarov's wife, comes to the door with a tray of apple cider. Then their young son, Stas, appears. He wishes Shurik a 'Happy Birthday' and gives him a small wrapped box. Instead of feeling brightened by the gift and salutation, Shurik feels depressed. He is thinking about what may lie ahead for him later on in the day. He opens the box, and finds a carved sledge (sleigh). He is touched. It is a family heirloom made by Komarov's great-great-grandfather. Shurik protests, saying that it should be kept for Stas. But Komarov puts his hand on Shurik's shoulder and tells him how much it means to them that, after his release from prison, he has chosen to stay there and live among them. Katya and Komarov make comments referring to their guilt, by association, about what the Soviets (Russians) did to Shurik by wrongly imprisoning him. It is also revealed that Komarov's father was the commandant of a Soviet prison camp near Ust'Olenek. He tells the sad story of his father's belated realization of what Stalin did to Russia, as well as the eventual shame it caused him and the rest of their family. Shurik assures them that they have nothing to feel guilty about. He says that he does not hold them responsible for the actions of their fathers.

From Komarov's shed, Shurik continues on down the lane. He sees the home of other residents, and thinks about these people and their stories. He comes to the village school, where he was a teacher many years before. The school is empty because it is summer. He goes into his old classroom. He recalls his first day there. He was "quaking" with fear, as he describes it. It was common knowledge that he was a former prisoner in the gulag. A young boy raises his hand and asks him if he was an "enemy" of the people. He responds that he was not an enemy of the people, but only an enemy of himself. The children seem puzzled. He tells them that he will never be their enemy, but only ever their friend. He recalls the echoes of the children's voices from those many years before, and his own, filled with love.



Chapter 3 Analysis

Who is to arrive that afternoon is still a mystery to the reader. Shurik makes it clear, however, that it will have, one way or another, a powerful effect on his life. He says that he would rather face death. With this in mind, he begins his daily walk and comes upon his friend, Komarov. This meeting reveals an affirmation of the forgiveness that Shurik seems to have bestowed upon all the people of this town. It is a forgiveness that he extends to all the people of Russia, who he deems cannot be held responsible for the actions of the few, many years ago. The fact that he has remained in Myshkino, among those closely associated with his captors, proves this. The visit to the classroom and the memories it conjures up remind Shurik of his unconditional love for these people.

The spider incident is an affirmation of what Kirill taught Shurik many years ago - do not tangle with those in power, but instead, adapt. Or in effect, let go. The spider lets the powerful wasp go, instead of taking it on, when it might have been consumed by it.



Chapter 4

Chapter 4 Summary

Back in the gulag, it is another weary, bone-chilling night. The prisoners are stomping their feet in the snow, trying to keep warm as they engage in muted conversation with the guards standing around nearby. As a large group of workers moves forward to the cage, Dmitri tells an amusing story about polar bears. This helps to lighten the mood. Shurik squeezes to the rear of the cage, which will take the prisoners down more than two kilometers below the earth's surface to the coal mine.

Once underground, Shurik explains how his team of seven members has rigged a light for their work area. This is against the rules. He explains how hard the work is. Short-handled picks are issued, that must be swung horizontally against the face of the wall, shattering the coal. It peppers their skins. They have no goggles with which to protect their eyes.

After three or four hours of this kind of work, they hear something in the tunnel and they are afraid. It is explained that the worst fear down in the coal mines is the threat of a cave-in. Shurik puts his ear against a wall and he hears a minute squeaking, or a vibrating hum. Kirill says that there is nothing they can do about it, and to forget it. He tells them that whatever happens, this is their fate. Ylli angrily responds that "fate" isn't for him. The companions take turns telling more stories, trying to relieve the tension. Then Titian, who has been on sledge duty, runs toward them and reports that there has been a rock fall in Gallery N. Nobody will be allowed to the surface until things get straightened around. They prepare themselves for a long wait.

After drifting in and out of sleep, Shurik hears footsteps coming from around a bend in the mine. Kirill calls out for whoever is there to identify themselves. It turns out that it is members of Work Unit 91, a unit of women. Embarrassed, the men silently stand around, looking at them. A woman steps toward Shurik, taking his hand and pulling him gently toward her. She invites him away. Asking his name, she takes a square of cloth out of her pocket and wipes the coal dust from his face. She identifies herself as Valya. She invites Shurik to feel her belly underneath her trousers, as she in turn moves her hands inside his clothes. As they have sex, Valya asks him if he can see houses with green walls, and a drift of smoke from a chimney. She says someone must be roasting chestnuts. For a moment Shurik is far away with Valya. They are in the midst of a snow-covered landscape, near a church where chanting can be heard. They can smell the fragrant essence of apple wood burning and chestnuts roasting.

Later on that night in their bunk house, Kirill asks Shurik if he is a "happy man." Not only is he happy because of the sex, Shurik replies, but because he has survived another day in the gulag and he has twine to mend his coat. Kirill tells him, "It's better to count your eggs and plan your omelet than dream of getting a few more and making a plateful



of blinis." He then tells Shurik that he will "make it." He tells him that if he can laugh in such a depressing world, then he'll survive.

At the far side of the bunkhouse a loud argument breaks out. Two members of the criminal class *blatnye* are arguing. One of them, Styopa, has been accused of stealing a herring ration from the other. Genrikh, the enforcer, comes around and roars at them, asking what is the matter. He finally signals for Shurik to come over, and asks if he can smell fish on the accused. Admitting that he has to tell the truth, or probably be collared as an accessory, Shurik admits he can smell fish on Styopa. Genrikh immediately signals for two of his henchmen to grab Styopa. They forcibly lay his arm down on the table. He takes a short-handled ax and summarily chops off the man's forearm. Kirill reminds Shurik that he could have done nothing about it, saying that "only the man who laughs, survives."

Chapter 4 Analysis

A most arbitrary and unexpected event occurs on this night, as Shurik toils away with his fellows more than a mile beneath the earth's surface: he has sex with a fellow prisoner. The momentary pleasure that this brings him is in stark contrast to his circumstances. He fears that he at first might lose his life in a mine cave-in, and then later on sees a man's arm chopped off for stealing a bit of herring. He is able to put this sexual encounter in perspective. He is happy for the experience, he is just as happy for surviving the gulag for another day, and also for the twine he has to mend his clothing. He seems to be learning from Kirill. At the beginning of the story, Kirill tells Shurik that he is one of the lucky ones, because he has a lamp to use in the mine. Not all prisoners have this perk. To consider oneself 'lucky' at all, under these circumstances, is a puzzle. It is also a part of Kirill's life's philosophy, which Shurik is continually learning. Kirill says that the man who sees the "funny" side of life survives, even if the picture is bleak, depressing and all but overwhelming. He also reminds Shurik that because of the power of fate over their lives, they are powerless to stop certain events, such as the horrific amputation of Styopa's arm. They must just accept the things that happen to them, and be grateful that they have survived another day.



Chapter 5

Chapter 5 Summary

Shurik describes the beginnings of Trofim's business in Myshkino. He and his friend, Tolya, worked as mechanics in the village of Solntsevo years before. One was working in the bus garage and the other was working on agricultural vehicles. They became very good mechanics. Now they are the proud owners of Myshkino Motors, which is a garage, repair shop and forge.

Continuing on his walk, Shurik approaches the garage where the two are working. He hears the sound of a grinding wheel, hammering and a cheap, tinny radio. He goes inside and sees an old derelict Russian limousine that is being repaired. It looks as though it must undergo extensive repairs before it can be of service again. He sees the apprentice, Romko, at work. Romko was once his pupil at the school. He is heartily greeted by Tolya and Trofim, and offered a cup of tea. Tolya asks what he has received from Trofim for his birthday. He replies that his present is a very old icon of St. Basil. He tells him how beautiful and exquisite it is. Shurik asks about the limousine. Trofim explains that it was the official Party car in Zarechensk. Tolya adds that they are going to restore it, and use it as a taxi in Myshkino. He begins to tell an engaging spy story. This reminds Shurik of Dmitri, who used to tell such stories. He looks down the lane and sees a group of men. In his mind's eye, they are his little group from Sosnogorsklag 32. He says he would not be surprised to see one turn and wave to him.

Shurik ponders more on Dmitri and their poignant parting on the steps of the prison camp twenty years earlier, the day Shurik was released. He promises Dmitri that someday he can have a desk in his office... a mahogany one, polished and tanned. He has not seen him since that day, and wonders what has happened to him.

The three finish their tea. Tolya slaps him on the back, and promises Shurik that he will be the first passenger to ride with the Myshkino Cab Company.

Trofim and Shurik leave the garage and walk together as far as the bridge. Shurik leans on the parapet, looking down at the water below. Trofim asks him if he has made up his mind, referring to the expected visitors. He replies that he hasn't. He tells Trofim that he must decide this for himself, without any opinions either from he or Frosya. He tells him that the world has moved on and that he hopes men will no longer have to tread the path that he has trod. Trofim begins to apologize. Shurik replies that no apologies are necessary. As they continue to look at the water below, he tells Trofim that he and his six companions were like a family. He declares that when he left the prison, he abandoned his family. Trofim protests, telling him that when he was granted his freedom, the hopes and dreams of the six others followed him out of the prison. One day they would see their own freedom in time. Shurik expresses his doubts about this. Trofim asks why he never went to Moscow and reported to the embassy there, that he was still alive. Shurik replies that it was important for him to come to Myshkino, to find



he and Frosya. He says that more allegiance is owed to friends and family, and less to country, referring to England. He uses his arm to encompass the landscape, the creek, Myshkino Motors, and the village. He declares that this little town is now his "country."

Trofim says he must get back to the garage. He says that he and Frosya have never regretted one moment in the twenty years that Shurik has lived with them.

Chapter 5 Analysis

Shurik has come upon the repair shop, owned by his adopted family member, Trofim. He sees an old pupil of his working there. As he walks along, he once again comes to a comfortable place. It is a place that has become a part of him. As this day progresses, he sees how his life in this adopted country of his is so close to his heart. It is an integral part of his being.

As he is standing in the shop, Shurik is reminded of his beloved Dmitri, whom he hasn't seen in twenty years. He takes the walk with Trofim down to the river and, as they stand on the bridge, he lets his feelings of guilt be known. He expresses to Trofim his sorrow at "abandoning" the rest of his "family" in the prison. He does not go to the British Embassy after his release because of his belief that people are family, more so than country; and it is to people that the most heartfelt allegiance must be owed. When he came to Myshkino, he somehow still felt connected to the deceased Kirill. He declares that here, because of his connection to Kirill, he has found a deep peace; and that is the reason why he has stayed here for the last twenty years.



Chapter 6

Chapter 6 Summary

A freezing morning dawns in the prison camp. The companions awaken and make jokes about the temperature. Kirill comes from the administration building in the dark, accompanied by three guards. One of the guards gathers the companions and tells them that they have been chosen for a special duty. They are to prepare to be transported away from the mining camp to another location. They are not told exactly what their task is. Ylli retrieves the rations. They are herded onto a transport truck with a canvas roof. They ride along, looking at the moon and in the stars in the freezing hours before dawn. They travel for about five hours, which they figure is about a hundred-ten or twenty kilometers. They arrive at the tent, which contains ten bunks arranged around a stove. They stoke up the fire and await orders.

A man who resembles an arctic explorer enters the tent and greets the prisoners. He identifies himself by a number, M938, the team leader of their unit. He is later identified as Dr. Solovyov. He asks each prisoner their respective names and what they did before they became prisoners. He eventually asks Ylli to fetch some coffee from another tent. Ylli does not know what to do at first, because he has never been allowed such a freedom before. Ylli goes and returns with the coffee, and as they drink it, Dr. Solovyov explains that their mission is an archaeological dig. They have been assigned this task because there has been an unusual break in the weather. It is estimated that they will have ten days to dig around the remains of a Great Woolly Mammoth. With this news, they are stunned into silence for a time.

The comrades have a discussion that night about their assignment. Kostya comments that the dig is not just the search for knowledge, but for the glory of the Soviet Union. They joke that it is like the "Space Race" between the Americans and the Soviets, but instead it is the "Mammoth Race." One of them says that now the Americans will be combing Alaska looking for the remains of a Mammoth. Shurik's mind wanders. He wonders if, in ten thousand years, someone will come along and find his remains there, buried under the snow and ice. They begin to discuss the idea of 'history'. Titian says it is a lie, and that if someone finds their bodies thousands of years hence, they will not be able to tell what they were about at all. They will only see a few bones and shredded clothing. He says that winners, not losers, write history and that the truth of the matter about them will never be found. The story of the losers is never really told.

On the second day of the dig, Shurik is the first to expose the mammoth's body. The team continues to scrape away as Dr. Solovyov and another archaeologist, Dr. Nedelko, stand by, watching. Solovyov tells them that it is about 22,000 years old. A discussion ensues about how the creature died, with the conclusion reached that it was probably hunted. Avel jokes that they are not "the first poor sods to slave away up here." Titian adds that, "Internal exile goes back a long way." Later that night, they are subdued as



they ponder the fact that "humanoids" may have roamed the forbidding landscape up there before them, and that they were their "slavish" predecessors.

By the sixth day, the entire side of the creature has been exposed. They dig through the tissue and are able to smell its rotting flesh. The archaeologists cut through its skin and subcutaneous layers of fat, and take samples of various organs. They continue to keep it iced down. By the ninth day, Dr. Solovyov declares the project finished. The group of prisoners stands above the trench and gazes down at the mutilated body. Solovyov informs them that they will re-bury it in ice and soil. He may return for more samples, but for now he and Dr. Nedelko have enough to keep them busy for several months. With the scientists out of sight, Kostya cuts away a substantial portion of meat, and that night the prisoners cook it over a fire. They eat the meat, each lost in thought, not having the words to express their feelings. They seem to be in awe of the fact that they are eating this meat, thousands of years old. It is gamey tasting and rich, and not at all tough. Shurik describes the experience as a transmogrification of their beings; as though they are temporarily ancient men, unable to utter words, but only grunts and grimaces. Shurik looks at them as they are gathered around the fire. His feeling of kinship with each of them intensifies.

Chapter 6 Analysis

Taking on the roles of temporary archaeologists in this frozen wasteland puts the prisoners in context with those who have gone before them. When it is concluded that the Mammoth may have died by human hand, they are compared with these "humanoids," who may have lived there thousands of years before. Why would anyone live there, except for the fact that they were prisoners, just as they are? There is an endless, depressing perpetuity to their class of human beings. Titian describes himself and the others as "losers," the ones that history has forgotten. He is also referring to their ancient predecessors. By eating the flesh of the Mammoth, they juxtapose themselves even closer to these forgotten people.

In spite of their circumstances, Shurik finds something of value in the situation. As the men silently eat their meal of ancient meat, he wonders at the feeling of friendship and kinship he is experiencing. He describes a friend as "one soul inhabiting two bodies." But in this bleak world, as they sit around the fire, he feels that it is one soul that is inhabiting seven bodies.



Chapter 7

Chapter 7 Summary

Shurik is still taking his leisurely birthday walk. He describes the history of the church of Saint Lazarus, the village church, which he comes across on his walk. During Stalin's era, there was no village priest and the church fell into ruin. Afterward, the people of the village gradually came back to the church; and an effort was made to restore it. He describes the day when he attended the meeting convened by village officials to discuss the future of the church. They ask his opinion about what should be done with it. He is fearful. It reminds him of the interrogations in the old days by Soviet officials. He gamely replies that he believes the church should be restored as a testament to the past. It helps the people to understand their cultural heritage. He says it will give continuity to the future. The officials retire to consider the question for a time. When they return, Shurik is complimented as an eloquent orator. A surge of emotion goes through him. He thinks that, after everything he went through under the Soviet system of punishment, he is now labeled "eloquent." They also take his advice, and restore the church.

He wanders by the village cemetery, which is adjacent to the church. He greets the priest, Father Kondrati, who happens to be there. He was appointed to the church three years earlier after its reconstruction. The priest greets him amicably and they have a pleasant conversation. Father Kondrati makes a reference to God. Shurik is silent, thinking that he does not believe in a merciful God, or gods, or any kind of charitable angels. When the priest asks Shurik what he will do with his day, he replies that he will live out his day with whatever it brings - the pains, the damp or cold - and its joys, if there are any. The father knowingly tells him that he understands where he has learned this. Shurik protests, saying that it was not just in the gulag that he has learned this. He says that every human being has to learn this, at every stage of life, and in whatever situation. As he stands with Father Kondrati, he thinks that he was an unlucky person in life and that he was caught up in a time in history when his number was the one chosen to spend years in the gulag. He says he does not forgive. He also did not surrender. If he had surrendered, he would not have survived. But in looking back on his life, he simply says that he accepts what has happened to him.

After leaving Father Kondrati, Shurik continues his walk up the hill and into the woods. He thinks back to times he had with Frosya and Trofim in the early days when he first came to them. He believes that they needed him, in a way, because he has brought the spirit of Kirill back with him from the gulag. As long as he is there with them, Kirill is there as well. He relates a time when he went with Trofim on an adventure in the forest. Trofim's idea was to show Shurik the wonders of the forest. As they walk along, they come across a bear. Trofim raises his gun, as if to shoot the bear. He lowers it, however, telling Shurik that he was never intending to shoot the bear. Shurik asks him why he raised the gun in the first place. He tells him that he wanted to let the bear know he was there. By letting the bear know that he was there, holding a gun, he had the power; but he was not going to use it



Chapter 7 Analysis

In describing his case for the church to the village officials, Shurik does not talk about God or religion. He instead makes reference to his life's experience; and his reply refers to what that experience has taught him. He declares that the church should be restored because it is a part of history. It is history that a man lives by, and the thing that is responsible for what he shall become. He is, of course, referring to his experience in the gulag. What happened to him there had a powerful effect on shaping his being.

Shurik is an atheist. When he greets the village priest, he makes reference to the fact that he does not believe in a God or gods. He thinks to himself that he has been in a place in "their creation" where their power has held no sway. Life is about living it, and accepting it: the pains, the joys, the heartbreak and the triumphs. It is about fate and destiny, and accepting both.

The bear incident illustrates the author's belief about power, strength, and the proper or improper use of it. It is through Trofim that this is expressed. Trofim has the bear in his sights, but lowers the gun, telling Shurik how much better it is to let your adversary know your strength, rather than to constantly prove it to him. He says that the bear understands this, and instinctively realizes the power behind the gun. This is because the bear is a creation of nature, and it goes along with nature's laws. It is only men who break nature's laws with weak substitutes of their own. Shurik understands this better than anyone. His entire experience in the gulag was about the Soviet system proving its strength; but to whom, what or why, no one knows. The gulag consisted of rules and laws that grinded against the laws of nature. He has come to realize the pointlessness of the Soviet system, and perhaps the pointlessness of all governments. Life is not about misguided laws, but about friendship and the brotherhood of souls.



Chapter 8

Chapter 8 Summary

The comrades are back "home" in the mole hole, as the mine is called. A blizzard has rolled in above them. They are called out to clear railroad tracks of snow and ice. During the process, they take shelter near one of the coal trucks. They make a snow fort and light lamps, which provides some heat. A packet of herring is produced, but they have nothing to drink. Shurik sets out with a bucket for some water. As he passes by one of the trucks, he sees a figure, and takes it for one of the guards. He ducks. He finds some water near the locomotive and returns. He sees the figure again and waves a nervous greeting. The figure seems to wave back. The little group enjoys its tasty meal. As they eat, Shurik listens to Kirill tell of his beloved hometown of Myshkino. Kirill declares to Shurik that one day, he will take him there.

They are ready to return to work. After setting off, they near the locomotive and see something sticking out of the snow. They see it is the torso of a dead man, the lower half of his body buried in the snow. His head is shaven and he is completely naked. They surmise that the man committed suicide, choosing to deliberately freeze to death. Shurik whispers to Kirill that he had seen him - this was the figure he mistook for a guard. He feels guilty, thinking that he could have saved him. Kirill tells him that he is not responsible for the dead, but for the living. As the guards carry the body away, Kirill quotes a Russian woman poet: "It was such a time when only the dead smiled, joyful in their peace." He remarks that time is here and now.

Back in their bunks, they lie under their blanket in the cold. Shurik recalls a prisoner who shared their bunkhouse with them for a time, but has since been transferred. His name was Korotchenko, and he told interesting stories. He told one about the Empress of China who, after being taken prisoner by the Chinese Communists, went mad. They discuss again the man who froze to death. They tell more stories, each retreating into his own world and dreaming of where he would like to be. Shurik finds himself in his own private garden. He says that all during his gulag years, he has been in this garden from time to time; and it has been his exclusive domain. No one else has ever been invited in, not even Kirill.

Chapter 8 Analysis

The body of the suicidal man signifies the utter despair and hopelessness that the prisoners feel. This man chose death over continuing to live out his nightmare. More stories of despair are told. The Empress of China went mad over her imprisonment and abuse. The outlet for these men is in their dreams, which can take them far away. Shurik reveals that his dream is a tranquil garden. He comes to that place, Myshkino, years later; and it is there that he chooses to remain, in that garden.



Chapter 9

Chapter 9 Summary

Kirill has left the priest and is now on a footpath in the woods. He situates himself on a log where he can see the town from a distance. He thinks about the letter, and some lines of verse come to his mind: "...I am the master of my fate: I am the captain of my soul." He wishes these words would go away. These lines of poetry will not leave his mind because he realizes that, for his entire life thus far, decisions have been made for him. Now he, himself, must choose. He thinks that the gulag has failed. The Soviet system was designed for prisoners to be released in the world and to conform to the Soviet way of thinking. But that is not what has happened. He knows that he truly is the "Captain" of his soul. With the arrival of this letter, he must now choose.

He continues on his walk and comes across a horse in a pasture. He greets it by name. Yuri, the owner of the horse, comes along and says hello to Shurik. They talk about the children whom Shurik taught in school. Yuri says they are successful because Shurik was their teacher. He says that he not only taught them, but also "opened" them up. He adds that the other teachers simply towed the party line. Shurik responds that they were their own teachers. Yuri says no, and insists that Shurik broadened their horizons. He tells him that he is appreciated there in Myshkino, and that he means something to all of them.

Chapter 9 Analysis

The hour is drawing near when Shurik will have to make a decision about his future. He realizes that he cannot put it off, and that the Soviet system is no longer there to make decisions for him. He realizes that he is in charge of his fate. Walking through the village on this day has reinforced this notion for him. He is feeling more equipped to face his visitors that evening.



Chapter 10

Chapter 10 Summary

The endless days in the mine continue. Shurik and the rest of the members of Work Unit 8 have lengthened the mole hole by seventy-nine meters over the course of three months. During a break one day, Shurik is lying on his back and notices the perfect outline of a leaf on the tunnel ceiling. It is a fossilized leaf. The others gather around to look at it. Shurik goes miles away in his mind, dreaming that he is in a garden in ancient Greece. He sees a statue of a beautiful young girl carved in marble. He reaches out his hand to touch it and it is still warm, as if the girl had only a moment ago been changed to marble from flesh and blood. He thinks how unlikely that is, however, because in that beautiful garden there can exist no evil. He reasons there can be no evil power in that beautiful garden to change a living person into inanimate marble. In his mind he enters the temple that is in the garden. All too soon the dream ends by the sound of Kostya's voice. He is asking Shurik the name of the woman he had sex with in the tunnel a while back. They have a discussion about their sexual prowess.

The team goes back to work. Kirill calls a halt to their digging when he smells something unusual in the tunnel. They are motionless for a few moments. Then as things appear to be under control, they go back to work, telling more jokes and stories. Suddenly, a portion of the mine collapses. Everything turns black. Shurik gathers his wits about him and tries to find a light. Dmitri speaks; he is alive. They find a working lamp. Shurik swings the light around, and to his horror, sees that Kirill is all but completely buried in the rubble. Ylli had been behind him, and he assumes that he is dead. Shurik shouts for Dmitri to go get help. Shurik then tries to get the rubble away from Kirill's head and face. Kirill is conscious, but weak. Shurik tells him to hang on, that Dmitri has gone for help. Kirill tells Shurik that he can't feel anything. He tells Shurik that he must go to Myshkino. In the panic of the situation, Shurik is unsure at first of what he is talking about. He realizes that he is giving up, and tells him to think of his wife. Kirill responds that his wife is dead. Panicked, he then tells him to think of his daughter. Kirill tells Shurik that he will go to his wife, but that he, Shurik, must go to his daughter, Frosya. Kirill then begs Shurik to take his life. He tells him that it is good to die with a friend, to "die at the hand of a man you know." Reluctantly, Shurik picks up a shovel, and complies.

Chapter 10 Analysis

Shurik is living in dreams. He dreams of a garden. Myshkino is a parallel to that garden, and is a future place that he longs for. He dreams of this beauty to escape his horrible reality. The days have continued on and on, without end, and the fossilized leaf is a symbol of that eternity.

Kirill's death is a triumph over that depressing eternity. He tells Shurik, as he lay dying, that if he kills him, the gulag will have lost. He says, "If you kill me, Shurik, I shall have

won. The victory of self-determination. And the gulag will have lost." His last dying wish is that Shurik go to Frosya in Myshkino. This will be his victory. Shurik's return there will be a symbol of Kirill's triumph over the gulag.



Chapter 11

Chapter 11 Summary

Shurik returns to the house to prepare for the visitors. Frosya has laid out clothes for him to wear. As he washes up and dresses, he thinks that Kirill is alive, not in an afterlife, but because he, Shurik, holds him near to his heart by thinking of him. Frosya comes in and asks Shurik if he has made a decision. He tells her he has. She goes to the bureau and takes a box out of the bottom drawer. She opens it and takes out a medal, which she pins to his lapel. It is a star, in the center of which is a hammer and sickle. He was awarded it years ago while he was still a teacher. Trofim comes home and asks if he is ready.

As they await the visitors, Shurik recalls the story of the fox that came around years ago, stealing their chickens. Trofim had set a trap, intending to kill it. They catch it, but Frosya convinces him to let her keep it alive awhile in captivity. It becomes tame, eventually eating out of Frosya's hand. When they finally let it go, it is reluctant to leave, looking back at them before slowly making its way into the forest, never to return. Shurik recalls his own story of release, thinking how afraid he had been as he left the gulag. He had known no other home.

The visitors arrive in a fancy-looking vehicle that resembles a Land Rover. They are a Mr. Grigson, who is the deputy head of mission at the Moscow, and Michael Tibble, Shurik's cousin. Michael Tibble explains to Shurik that he is the son of Marion Tibble, the sister of Alan, who is Shurik's father. Therefore they are first cousins. He says that he knew Shurik's father, and tells him that he died in 1968. He also tells Shurik that his mother, Beatrice, died in 1986. He explains that Beatrice spent years hounding and pestering the Soviet authorities in her quest to find him. He produces a letter that Shurik's mother received from Premier Khrushchev years before. In it, Khrushchev expressed his regrets to her about her missing son, but says that there is no more that can be done about it. Shurik thanks Tibble for this information. They go on to explain that, though they continued to look for him, they were unable to find him until after KGB files were released, after the collapse of the Soviet Union.

Shurik then asks about Tibble's family. He learns that his oldest son, Alexander, is named after him. It becomes clear that Michael Tibble would like Shurik to come back to England with him and live with his family. Shurik says that if he were to go with him, he would be in an unfamiliar place, and he would be without friends. Tibble says that he understands. Shurik invites him and his family to come and visit him in Myshkino. Tibble replies that he would be honored to do so. They all sit for a while under the birch trees, quietly observing the sunset. As the two get up to leave, Shurik unpins the medal on his lapel and gives it to Tibble, telling him that it is for his son, Alexander. Tibble tells Shurik that he appreciates the gesture. Shurik tells him that giving him this memento is "the sign of a good man in Russia."



Chapter 11 Analysis

Shurik has made up his mind about his future. Awaiting the arrival of the visitors, he remembers the story of the fox. The fox's story parallels his own. When it came time to be released, he, like the fox, felt a sense of regret because the gulag was all he had ever known. The fox hesitated and looked back before disappearing into the woods. But unlike the fox, Shurik decides that he will not leave. He has found a home in Myshkino and will never leave it, even though in name and nationality he belongs elsewhere. He appreciates the sincerity of his cousin, and the long search he undertook to find him. He finds out that his family did not abandon him after all. He discovers the lengths that his mother went to find him. He is grateful for the invitation to return to England with his cousin, but he chooses to remain with his friends and his adopted family of Trofim and Frosya. The bond of love and their "brotherhood of souls" are too strong for him to break.



Chapter 12

Chapter 12 Summary

It is a peaceful evening in the village, and the townsfolk are sitting around a bonfire. Shurik sits in his usual chair, which is brought down for him from under the silver birch tree. Frosya gets up and rakes some of the potatoes over the coals. Shurik is asked to tell a story. He tells a story of an Armenian on a tour of Belarus. It is a familiar one, and people begin laughing in anticipation of it. Sparkling cider is passed around, and a toast is proposed. Trofim gives a toast to Shuik. He tells them what a blessing he has been to all of them. As people begin to leave, Shurik thinks about his day and his wanderings among the people of the village. He recalls that, after the fancy limousine pulled away and his cousin departed, he looked at the contents of the envelope that was left for him by his cousin. Among other things, it contained his mother's last will and testament, which read that in case he was never found, her estate would be passed to her nephew, Michael Tibble. Her estate is worth 412,000 British pounds. He thinks with admiration of his cousin, who potentially forfeited this inheritance by coming to look for him. As he stands looking at the moon that night, he decides that he will ask his cousin for just one thing: a sum of money to be set aside as scholarship money for two Myshkino students each year. The rest shall be divided between his cousin Michael, and his cousin's brother. After thinking for a minute, he changes his mind. He decides that the third thing he will ask for will be a fancy Land Rover vehicle, like the one his cousin arrived in, to serve as the Myshkino taxicab.

Chapter 12 Analysis

Shurik has made his decision to stay with his family in his beloved Myshkino. He will ask for no monetary compensation from his will, but only scholarships and a cab for the town. It is his way of giving back to the people of Myshkino, who gave so much to him.



Characters

Alexander "Shurik" Bayless

Shurik is the story's main character. The story begins as he wakes up on the day of his eightieth birthday, and begins to think back on his life as a prisoner in a Soviet labor camp. For the past twenty years he has been living as a free man in the Russian countryside with Frosya and Trofim, relatives of a deceased fellow prisoner. He is apparently happy and content living with them. They love him very much and have welcomed him into their home, as if he were family. He is also a well-loved and respected member of the community. A mysterious letter has recently arrived, however, which has set him to thinking about his hard life. Someone is due to arrive in the village later that afternoon; and this event may change the course of his life. The story alternates between the day of his birthday, where Shurik will examine himself and perhaps try to discover the meaning of his existence, and his years spent back in the prison camp. He spent twenty-six years there, falsely accused of committing crimes against the Soviet state. Before prison, he worked for a scrap-metal buying company in England. A native Briton, he was a graduate of English Literature from the University of Durham.

In the chapters that detail his past, Shurik describes his relationships with his fellow prisoners. They endure hardships together; and immutable bonds form. He becomes closest to Frosya's father, Kirill. He describes how Kirill taught him to survive in the excruciating conditions. Before he dies in the mine, Kirill tells Shurik to go back to Myshkino and find Frosya. When he is finally released, Shurik does exactly that. He never expects, however, that after more than twenty years, he will still be with Frosya and Trofim. After all the time he spent in Siberia, it would seem natural that when released, he would choose to return to his native Britain. But this is not what he does. The story, in effect, is an exposition of Shurik's reasons for staying in Russia and choosing not to leave the family of his beloved friend.

In the chapters that chronicle the present, Shurik's love for the people of Myshkino is revealed. As he takes his daily walk through the village, he meets with many of them; and through conversation and memory, his rich life there is revealed. The mysterious visitor due to arrive in Myshkino later that afternoon is the crisis of his life. It is perhaps the biggest crisis since his time as a prisoner. It is the event that his future hinges upon.

Kirill Karlovich Balashov

Kirill is Frosya's father, and the first prisoner Shurik meets in Sosnogorsklag 32 labor camp. He is the one who Shurik develops the deepest relationship with. Kirill is the leader of Work Unit 8, which includes five other men. He teaches Shurik how to survive the horrors of the gulag, telling him that he must adapt, and not fight. He speaks constantly of his beautiful hometown of Myshkino. After the mine collapses one day, and



as he lies dying under the rubble, Kirill's last request for Shurik is that he go to Myshkino and find Frosya. He also asks Shurik to kill him, to put him out of his misery. He says it is better to die by the hand of a friend. He explains in that way, it isn't the gulag that has defeated him. After his release from prison, Shurik goes to Myshkino and finds Frosya and Trofim. It is his presence there, in Myshkino, which keeps his friend Kirill's spirit alive. Shurik believes that he owes his survival to Kirill.

Frosya

Frosya is Kirill's daughter. She appears in the first pages of the story taking care of the elderly Shurik in her home. Frosya knocks on Shurik's bedroom door to awaken him on the day of his birthday. She prepares his breakfast, and seems worried about the visitors who are expected to arrive that afternoon. She senses that she may lose Shurik after all these years. She is also the one who has kept Kirill's hopes alive in all the years he was imprisoned in the gulag. He has thought about her and his beloved Myshkino; and together they have given him hope to live on in dire conditions. She is in her late forties. She is the devoted wife of Trofim.

Trofim

Trofim is Frosya's husband, and Kirill's son-in-law. He is a hard-working member of the Myshkino community. He owns a garage in Myshkino, which includes an automobile repair shop and a forge. He is in business with Tolya, a fellow soldier in the Soviet army. He has gladly welcomed Shurik into his home for more than two decades, regarding him as a member of his family. He is a pillar of the community.

Avel

Avel is a member of Work Unit 8, the unit that Shurik is assigned to when he arrives at the prison camp. He is known as one of "Kirill's Boys," as all the members of Work Unit 8 are referred to. He is of medium height, with pointed features and a sharp chin. He has fingers that are slender, as if he were a pianist or a violinist. He was a pilot in the Soviet army, and fought in Korea against the Americans. His nickname is "Avel the Aviator." He was shot down twice during the Korean conflict. He has the heart of an artist, and prefers to spend his free time carving chess pieces out of coal and shale.

Kostya

Kostya is also a member of Work Unit 8. His real name is Konstantin. He was formerly a warrant officer in the Soviet Navy. He spent eight years in the service, sailing the Pacific and Indian oceans on a frigate. His job on the ship was to watch out for American submarines and destroyers, and to protect a Soviet battleship based in Odessa. He has been to many parts of the world, and has many stories to share with his fellow prisoners.



Ylli

Ylli is the only other foreigner working in the mine, besides Shurik. He is an Albanian who came to the Soviet Union as an engineering student. He studied for two years and did well in school; but his girlfriend turned him into the authorities one day after he earned better marks than she did on a test. He is a natural pessimist, and among the prisoners, is sometimes quiet and non-communicative.

Titian

Titian is a former mathematics teacher, who is quiet and cultured. He found himself in prison after he gave a low grade to a pupil whose father was a member of the Party. He knew that he was taking a chance when he did this; but he is a man of principles, and he did what he thought was right.

Dmitri

Dmitri is the final member of Work Unit 8. At one time he was an army conscript, a cook, a janitor for a block of luxury apartments, and a shopkeeper. He has a good sense of humor, and tells stories to keep his fellow prisoners entertained. He was imprisoned in the gulag because he gave the wrong change to a woman one day during the time he owned a shop. After she reported him to the authorities, he was accused betraying socialist principles and having capitalist tendencies.

Komarov

Also known as "Komar." He is a neighbor of Shurik's in the village of Myshkino. As he takes his birthday walk, Shurik encounters his friend, Komarov, and they have a friendly talk. He is a big man, with a full black beard that is beginning to turn gray. He has a jovial personality. He owns the apple mill in the village.

Katya

Komarov's wife. She brings apple cider for Shurik and Komar to drink during Shurik's visit. She and Komar represent the good that is now the larger part of Shurik's life after all of the hardship he has endured.

Stas

Komar and Katya's son. His full name is Stanislav Yurievich. He brings Shurik a birthday present. It is a beautiful antique carving of a miniature sleigh. He represents innocence and goodness.



Vera Dorokhova

A widow who lives in Myshkino. She seems to be attracted to Shurik, though he expresses no interest in her. Several years back, he had apparently frozen to death in the forest.

Yelyutin

The village carpenter of Myshkino. He is not introduced as a character that speaks or interacts with Shurik; but the whine of his jigsaw is described as Shurik passes by as he takes his walk. He represents a part of the village that makes Myshkino what it is - a communal place with individual parts contributing to the functioning whole.

Andryukha

The baker of Myshkino. He sells bread to the villagers, and also to people in the neighboring village of Zarechensk.

Izakov

Izakov used to live in Myshkino. He is mentioned as Shurik passes by his shuttered-up house. He and his wife slipped out of town unnoticed one day. His fate is uncertain. Leaving the embrace of the community, it is as if they are on the outside, lost and forgotten.

Demyan Simonovich

One of Shurik's pupils in his former days as a teacher in Myshkino. He is the pupil who challenged Shurik, asking him in front of a roomful of other students if he was an "enemy of the state." When he grew up he joined the Soviet army and became a captain. He suffered a grisly death in Afghanistan.

Dusya

A leader of a women's work unit in the mine. Shurik's group encounters this group one day when there is an emergency in the mine.

Valya

A prisoner in Dusya's work unit. She is thin and sinewy, with closely cropped hair. She singles out Shurik, and makes a sexual advance toward him. They have sex in the darkness of the mine.



Genrikh

The leader of the *blatnye*, which is the criminal element in the prison camp. Genrikh is in the prison for rape and murder. He is a big, rough looking man, and known to have a cruel streak. He summarily chops off another prisoner's arm for stealing.

Styopa

A prisoner in the gulag, known as one of the *blatnye*. He becomes involved in an argument one day, and is accused of stealing another prisoner's ration of fish. After an abbreviated, mock trial, Genrikh chops off his arm as punishment.

Tolya

Tolya is Trofim's partner in the Myshkino Motors business. He and Trofim were in the Soviet army together. He is a cheerful, optimistic, and hard working. He is a storyteller, much as Dmitri was. He reminds Shurik of Dmitri. Shurik likes to think Dmitri is living a quiet life somewhere in a corner of Russia, telling jokes as Tolya does, and making people around him happy with his good humor.

Romka

Tolya's apprentice at Myshkino Motors. He is a former pupil of Shurik's.

Father Mikhail

The former village priest. In 1919, he spoke up one day and prophesied the bleak future of Russia. The next day he disappeared. For many years, there was no replacement for him.

Father Kondrati

The present village priest. He has been the village priest for three years. He is in his mid-thirties, with a long beard, and spectacles. He reminds Shurik of the way Leon Trotsky looked. He speaks of God to the atheist, Shurik; but Shurik tolerates this. He knows that Father Kondrati has good intentions.

Dr. Solovyov

The archaeologist leading the dig for the Giant Woolly Mammoth. The members of Work Unit 8 are assigned to this task for about ten days. Dr. Solovyov is not interested in making the prisoner's lives uncomfortable, as some of the prison guards are back at the



mine. He is a scientist, completely immersed in his scientific project. He treats the prisoners humanely.

Dr. Nedelko

Dr. Solovyov's partner and fellow scientist. He is involved with Solovyov in the excavation of the mammoth.

Michael Tibble

The mysterious visitor who arrives in Myshkino on the afternoon of Shurik's birthday. He is Shurik's English cousin, the son of Shurik's aunt. He has come to Myshkino to find his long lost cousin. He has also come to give Shurik the opportunity to claim the inheritance that is rightfully his. Shurik's mother, Beatrice, was a wealthy woman. He also explains to Shurik what happened in the years following his imprisonment, and how his mother spent years trying to find out what happened to him. He is an accountant and the father of two boys. One of his boys is named Alexander, after Shurik.

Geoffrey Grigson

Deputy head of the mission at the Moscow embassy. He was employed by Tibble to help him find Shurik. He accompanies Tibble on his trip to Myshkino.



Objects/Places

Sosnogorsklag 32 Labor Camp

The camp where Shurik is sentenced for allegedly committing crimes against the Soviet State. Located in Siberia, it is also generally known as the "gulag." The camp is comprised of fifty wooden barracks, as well as administrative buildings, stores, and quarters for the guards. It is surrounded by electrified fences, watch towers, wire entanglements and a moat, which is filled with twisted barbed wire and iron stakes. The land surrounding the camp is scrubby, flat and treeless. It is in the vicinity of the Arctic Circle. The coal min is located six kilometers away, where the prisoners spend the bulk of their time, mining coal.

Myshkino

The hometown of the prisoner, Kirill. It is here that Shurik has spent the remainder of his days since his release from prison. It is an ideal place, where neighbors get along and work together, each contributing to the society to make it a functioning whole. It was the dream and constant hope of Kirill, as he spent the bulk of his adult years in Sosnogorsklag 32. He would often tell Shurik about it, telling him that he must visit Myshkino after his release from prison. As years went by, it became increasingly important for Kirill that Shurik go to Myshkino and find his daughter, Frosya. He said that he must go "for him," as if he knew that he would never see it again, even before mine collapsed one day and he lay dying under the rubble.

Hut 14

The wooden barrack that Shurik and his fellow prisoners in Work Unit 8 are assigned to. It is "home," within the prison. Here they tell stories to one another, and try to live as normally as possible. Several dramas take place as members of the *blatnye*, the criminal class prisoners, attempt to challenge Shurik's group in several instances. It is their physical shelter in the storm of the prison, and the flimsy structure that helps to keep them alive, along with the resilience of their spirits.

The Village School

After Shurik settled into his life in Myshkino, he became a teacher in the village school. Here he taught students how to think, and how to dream. He exposed the students to authors such as Turgenev, Mark Twain, Jack London, Zola and Pushkin. On the day of his eightieth birthday, as he thinks back to his days as a schoolteacher. He remembers that he loved his students. They gave him a reason for living after all the suffering he endured. While he was still a teacher, one time he was challenged by a student, who called him "an enemy of the state." It was well known he had been a prisoner in the



gulag system. He dealt with this assault with equanimity, recalling how this young person ended up dying a horrible death in service to his country. What alliance is true and good, he seems to be asking? To whom and to what do we owe our allegiance? With this young man's allegiance to the Soviet State, he dies a horrible, possibly pointless death. Shurik, on the other hand, seems to have learned that, despite differences in nationality and political persuasion, love can abound and cross these borders. The borders delineated by the obvious, such as those that separate countries, are nothing, if not gray; there are apparently no borders in Shurik's experience that cleanly separate black from white, so to speak.

The Coal Mine

The coal mine, about six kilometers away from the prison camp, is where Shurik spends the bulk of his time. It is nicknamed the "mole hole." Early in the mornings, before dawn, the prisoners are driven there by truck to begin their long days digging for coal. The mine is two kilometers beneath the earth's surface. There, the prisoners are given short pick axes; and the work entails hacking away at the walls of the mine. One day Shurik's group encounters a unit of women prisoners. They are described as being somewhat sexless; thin, with short hair, wearing loose clothing. The mine has taken away not only individual freedoms, but identities as well. Shurik has sex with one of them. As he does, they talk of a beautiful landscape somewhere with a church, where snow is gently falling. Their moment of pleasure brings them into another world, if only for a short time.

The Limousine

Trofim and Tolya are busy working to restoring an old communist party limousine to be used as a taxi for the village. When Shurik finally meets his cousin and finds out that he is the recipient of a small fortune, he refuses his inheritance - all except for a limousine, to be used as the village taxi. He requests a plush leather interior and air conditioning.

The Great Woolly Mammoth

Work Unit 8 is assigned to take part in an archaeological dig for a Great Woolly Mammoth, for a short period of time. As the prisoners uncover the carcass, they are reminded of the passage of time. As they conclude that the mammoth was probably hunted and killed by humans, they make the stunning realization that people, like themselves, have been imprisoned in this frozen wasteland for centuries. They are not the first, nor will they be the last.

The Bear

Shurik and Trofim encounter a bear in the woods one day. Trofim makes as if to shoot it, but then lowers his gun. The bear retreats. It is an example of the harmony and intuition



of the natural world. The bear only had to be aware of the dominance of the man with the gun, in order to retreat. He did not actually have to be destroyed.

The Caged Fox

Trofim plans to shoot a fox that has been eating their chickens. But Frosya instead asks that it be penned up. Soon the fox becomes tame. When finally let out of its cage, instead of running away directly into the forest, it lingers. The fox is a metaphor for Shurik's life.

The Spider

While visiting his friend, Komarov, in his apple mill, the two observe a spider that has a wasp caught in its web. Instead of capturing the wasp, the spider lets it go. Komarov observes that even a spider knows its own strength, as opposed to that of a wasp. Its instincts tell it to let this dangerous creature go, so as not to endanger itself. This is another illustration of Kirill's philosophy. He teaches Shurik not to strike back at his powerful enemies, because to do so will guarantee his death. He instead teaches him to adapt himself, which will help him to survive.



Themes

Love and Nationality

The question of Shurik's nationality and its conflicting nature is a centerpiece of this story. He is born an Englishman, yet after his release from the gulag, he finds himself voluntarily living out the remainder of his life in the former Soviet Union. He never attempts to reach the British Embassy, where he could have identified himself and found a way to return to Britain. Instead, he finds the peaceful village, where his friend Kirill was born, and remains within the borders of the country that probably took the most away from him. It was in the gulag that Shurik lost his freedom, his dignity and his humanity. For years, he was identified simply by a number. He was treated cruelly by the prison officials - freezing in the winter, working to near exhaustion in the mines, and never having enough to eat. Yet in the end, Shurik chooses to live out the remainder of his life in Kirill's native country, and not his own. He chooses to stay in the place identified with his captivity.

The reasons lie with his relationship with Kirill, and what it is he has learned from his deceased friend. Kirill's influence on Shurik was profound. The bond forged between the two men has remained, even after death. Kirill became Shurik's closest confidant and friend in prison, and he learned lessons from him that ensured his survival. He learned that to fight within the prison meant death, but to accept the situation was to come to a kind of peace within oneself, which gave one the strength to continue on amid the horror.

The bond that was forged between them directly affected Shurik's actions following his release. As the story begins, Shurik describes the journey he sets out upon. He has an address and a name. He makes his way to the town of Myshkino, where Shurik's daughter, Frosya, lives with her husband, Trofim. He has never met either of them. They do not know he is and have never heard of him. They are suspicious of this stranger on their doorstep. He tells them that he has come from Kirill. Suddenly, everything changes. The lives of these two simple, good and honest people will never be the same. Shurik has entered their lives, and in doing so, has vicariously brought Frosya's beloved father, Kirill, with him. His presence has restored something to them that has been missing for years, the memory of which had been perhaps a constant ache in Frosya's heart. As time goes on, their temporary visitor begins to find a place within their hearts that they will not easily let go of. In the same way, Shurik finds that it is in this modest home, in the heart of this country village, is where his heart truly belongs. He never makes the journey to Moscow to identify himself to the British Consulate as Alexander Bayless, a long lost British citizen, presumed dead.

The love that Shurik finds in Myshkino has nothing to do with nationality or blood relations. He eschews that connection. It is instead of a love that is about human hearts connecting, wherever they may have originated from. The best and deepest love that he has found has come from people who live in Russia, a far distance from his own native



England. This distance is measured, not only by miles, but also by cultural and political divides. In choosing Frosya, Trofim and Myshkino, Shurik also rejects politics and its implications. When finally given the choice to return to England and live with his relatives, Shurik refuses. He has found all the love he has ever needed in Myshkino, the hometown of this friend, Kirill. Kirill's spirit lives on, he says, on account of his presence there. He has brought Kirill with him when he came to live with Frosya and Trofim. He feels that, in order to keep his beloved Kirill alive, he must remain there; though it is not out of a sense of obligation, but out of a deep, everlasting love.

The Inevitability of One's Destiny

Shurik has never fought with the fact that he spent many, many years in the gulag, imprisoned for a crime he did not commit. He tells Father Kondrati at one point that he has come to accept his fate, not with "docility," but with "understanding." He does not hate what has happened to him. He was caught up in history and came to be a prisoner, and it was his fate to do so. He says that he was unlucky. He says that there is no difference in the fact that he was in the gulag for all those years, and the fate of the millions of peasants who died for the "glory of God". It just happens to be where you are caught up in history. What matters, he says, are your friends and the love that you find with them. This transcends all borders and nationality. It is perhaps the belief in this idea that clarifies his choice to remain in Myshkino. It was destiny, perhaps, that brought him there. Why should he break or interrupt it? Perhaps it was also his destiny to meet Kirill. By doing so, this established another reason for him to come to Myshkino and stay there. There are simply too many forces of destiny at work in Shurik's life experience, so that what may appear to be common sense, or an Englishman's "duty," will simply not be enough to change the direction of one's life when shaped by such a powerful entity known as "destiny."

Death As A Choice

Kirill chooses to die by the hand of his friend, Shurik. He says that it is better to die by the hand of someone you know, rather than let outside forces kill you. Shurik agrees with this. He says, "A man's passing, his last cavort in the tango of life, before he switches partners for the waltz of death, should be of his own choosing." This is why Shurik complies with Kirill's wish, and crushes his friend's skull with a shovel as he lay near death under the rubble of the mine collapse. The mine doesn't win. The gulag doesn't win. It is, in effect, Kirill's choice to die, and he chooses the method by which it is done.

In perhaps the same way, the man who was found frozen to death near the site of the Great Woolly Mammoth chose to die by his own hand. Did the mine win in that case, or did he? Perhaps death in that case was not inevitable, and the man succumbed to his own physical and spiritual weakness; in which case it was the mine, in fact, which won. Kirill keeps reiterating that Shurik must adapt himself to survive. This story is not one of succumbing to death and viewing it as some kind of a triumph. Kirill faced his inevitable



death and asked that Shurik have a hand in its outcome, because there was no choice. He was most assuredly dying. Perhaps Shurik's action in this case was simply another bond forged between them, strengthening their friendship in the end and further securing Shurik's destiny.

The Law of Nature As the Best Law to Abide By

Shurik and Trofim one day make a foray into the woods where they encounter a bear. Trofim raises his gun sights on the bear, but does not shoot it. He tells Shurik that if you let your adversary know your strength, then he will respect it. The bear was aware of the gun, and retreated. It was not necessary to kill the bear to "tame" it. He adds that it is only men who break nature's laws and supplant them with their own.

The bear incident is a metaphor for the gulag and the prisoners it held and destroyed. Perhaps it is no coincidence that the "bear" is also one of Russia's national symbols. By imprisoning men and women, the system destroyed their lives. It was not necessary to do this, to destroy people, as Trofim obviously would have destroyed the bear had he shot it. But the Soviet system went against the Law of Nature, and supplanted it with an imperfect law of its own. This law was characterized by unspeakable cruelty and injustice. It was a system that perverted the natural order of things, simply destroying in a random fashion all that it feared.

Another reason why the wise Trofim does not destroy the bear is because the bear - or that strong symbol of nature - is not at fault; and he knows this. The bear is a potential killer, but it is in balance with the system that it was designed to be a part of. It is rather a perversion of nature and fear itself, which causes violence. The Soviet society feared strength outside of its own, and it sought to destroy any strength it could not categorize or control. It was wholly threatened by powers outside of its being. Men and women with free wills and free minds have a strength that cannot be measured. The Soviet System could not adapt to, or come to terms with this kind of power. It could not find a way to keep it in check, so it chose to destroy it instead. The Soviets attempted to destroy the free man, the one who was created naturally, born of a free will and mind. This was a perversion of nature. Shurik's entire fight within the gulag was a fight to retain what was naturally given to him - his humanity, and his freedom of heart, mind and spirit.



Style

Point of View

The story is told in the first person by the protagonist, Shurik. The twelve chapters alternate between the present, on the day of Shurik's eightieth birthday, and the past, when he is a prisoner in Sosnogorsklag 32. Through the exposition of six chapters in each time period, the story of his life is revealed and the reasons become clear for the choices he eventually makes. Much of the action takes place in Shurik's thoughts, especially in the present, as these chapters consist of a walk he takes through the village. He meets many of the villagers whom he has known for years; and, as he meets each one, his relationship with them is revealed. He recounts in his thoughts what they have meant to him over the years. The prison narrative, on the other hand, is a day-to-day diary. Shurik reveals the story of his life as a prisoner, as the action occurs.

Setting

There are two primary settings to this novel. The story begins in the peaceful village of Myshkino in the Russian countryside, where Shurik has lived for the past twenty years. The second is the prison camp in Siberia, where he was sentenced to twenty five years of hard labor for committing crimes against the state. The prison camp, Sosnogorsklag 32, is almost a character unto itself. It has broken and killed many men; and for the ones who have survived it, they emerge as changed men. Myshkino is a place of healing; and it is here that Shurik has decided to live out the remainder of his life, in spite of a chance that comes at the end of the story to return to his native England. The coal mine is another important setting. It is where Shurik and the other prisoners spend the bulk of their time, hacking away with pick axes at the walls of the mine. It seems to Shurik and the others that this is all they will ever do for the remainder of their lives. The mine represents that hopelessness that Kirill tries to guard Shurik against. Kirill always has the hope that he will one day again see Myshkino and his daughter, Frosya. He gives this hope as a gift to Shurik. Though Kirill never realizes his dream, Shurik is able to realize it.

Language and Meaning

The story is told by the perspective of the main character, Shurik, sometime in the 1980s. He is an old man by now, and he tells the story as if he wants to set it down in writing before he dies, so that the truth of this tale will not be lost.

As he tells the story from the past in the prison camp, he mixes dialogue from other characters with his own expository thoughts. In this section, the action unfolds and is related by Shurik as it occurs. The reader is able to experience firsthand the pain and suffering the characters are made to endure in the camp.



Quotes

"To die with a friend,' Kirill replied. 'To die by the hand of a man whose name you know.'" Chapter 1, p. 12

"All you have seen is the exercise of authority, the exploitation of power. It is always cruel, to suit its purpose. As for us? We fight and die, or adapt and live." Chapter 2, p. 41

"No,' I told him quietly, looking him straight in the eye, 'I was never an enemy of the people. I have only ever been an enemy of myself.'" Chapter 3, p. 70

" 'You'll make it, Shurik,' he declared, slapping my shoulder. 'If you can laugh when the world is black, you'll make it. The man who sees the funny side survives.' Chapter 4, p. 93

" 'I owed my gratitude to you and Frosya and my allegiance to my comrades,' I said at length, 'not to my country. Friends are more important than flags, Trofim.'" Chapter 5, p. 111

"A friend, it went, is one soul inhabiting two bodies. Yet here, in this bleak place of adversity and pain, we were not two but seven. And what we had between our disparate selves was something men who lived in comfortable amenity would treasure beyond health or wealth." Chapter 6, p. 138

"I consider it the restoration of a facet of the past which will give continuity to the future. A man lives by his history and what he was is what shapes what he shall become.'" Chapter 7, p. 143

"It was all a part of the process of rehabilitation, of making us come to appreciate that Mother Communism, that buxom, grinning, snag-toothed wench dressed in a pair of dark blue overalls, with a scarf around her head and biceps like Popeye the Sailor man, would provide for us. She was our succour and our saviour as well as our slave-mistress and superintendent." Chapter 9, p. 189

"For, after all, I was the master of my fate. It was a responsibility which came with liberty, and it scared me. It always has, deep down. Yet what is fate but nothing more than a melody of time, drawn from an instrument I can neither tune nor play, but only listen to from day to day." Chapter 9, p. 190

" 'If you kill me, Shurik, I shall have won. The victory of self-determination. And the gulag will have lost.'" Chapter 10, p. 217



Topics for Discussion

Discuss Kirill's role in Shurik's future. How much of an impact did he have on the path that Shurik's life eventually took?

What did Shurik have to do in order to survive the gulag? What did he learn from his friends?

Discuss the "exploitation of power" in all its facets. Who or what was exploiting whom in this story?

Shurik chooses not to return to his native country. How did he reject his country? Was he a traitor?

Discuss some possible real reasons why Shurik may be been imprisoned in the gulag for twenty-six years, when he was neither tried nor convicted in a court of law? Discuss how this question might possibly be related to the perversion of nature in the story, in light of the Soviet system of government versus the natural order of the world.

This book was written in 1998, but takes place during the Cold War. Does the Cold War have any role in this story? If so, did the author use it to make a point?

What was the significance of the Great Woolly Mammoth to the larger story?