

# **The Storyteller (Jodi Picoult) Study Guide**

**The Storyteller (Jodi Picoult) by Jodi Picoult**

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# Plot Summary

In Jodi Picoult's novel *The Storyteller*, baker Sage Singer works alone on the night shift at a small bakery and avoids people during the day, in both situations concealing from other people both a facial scar and the guilt she feels about the accident that caused it. When she forms an unlikely friendship with 95-year-old Josef Weber, she expects that all she will learn is to play chess with him, so it is a shock when he reveals that he was a guard at a Nazi concentration camp, and later that he wants her to help him die. Both the confession and the request turn Sage's world upside down, but eventually give her new insights into herself, her family, and the nature and purpose of forgiveness.

Twenty-five year old Sage Singer works at Our Daily Bread bakery in her small New Hampshire hometown. She welcomes the opportunity to work alone overnight because it helps her hide from the rest of the world, a habit she has formed since a car accident three years previously left her face scarred and her mother dead. Her relationship with a married undertaker (Adam) is a source of friction with her boss/best friend, Mary, but Sage does not feel she deserves any better.

Sage's life changes when she meets and becomes friends with ninety-five year old Josef Weber, a former German teacher and baseball coach beloved by the community. His reputation, however, is the main reason she is shocked when he confesses that he was an officer in Hitler's army and took part in the mass murders of Jews and other undesirables. He further surprises the Jewish Sage by first asking her to forgive him and then asking her to help him die. Sage immediately contacts the police, who put her in touch with Leo Stein, a thirty-seven year-old divorced attorney with the Department of Justice and passionate hunter of former Nazis. He is skeptical of her claim at first, but after further conversation becomes intrigued enough to ask her to prompt Josef for more information, and eventually to come to New Hampshire to investigate the case himself.

When Leo says that, if possible, they need an eyewitness who can identify Josef (who now says his name is actually Reiner Hartmann), Sage approaches her grandmother Minka, a native of Poland who was imprisoned in a concentration camp during the war. After some initial doubts, Minka agrees to tell her story to Sage and Leo. She describes an idyllic childhood in Poland that gradually disintegrated into horror as the Nazis moved all the Jews into ghettos and eventually to concentration camps. After all other members of Minka's family were murdered, she ended up in Auschwitz, where her knowledge of German gained her a job in the office of Franz Hartmann, an administrator at the camp and not nearly as innately cruel as his brother Reiner. Minka also tells Sage and Leo that in an effort to keep herself and other inmates sane, she wrote a lengthy story involving a young woman, two very different brothers, and a number of mythical creatures, using the only paper she has -- the backs of photos she takes from the belongings of dead prisoners. When Franz reads the story he becomes fascinated with it, seeing it as an allegory representing his brother and himself. He subtly gives Minka extra food and warm clothing on the condition that she write an additional ten pages each night and read them to him the following day. Their relatively peaceful relationship



is challenged, however, when Reiner kills Minka's best friend in cold blood and Franz saves her (Minka's) life by beating her savagely and sending her away before Reiner can kill her too.

The description of the murder of Minka's friend is the evidence Leo needs to pursue a case against Josef, but first he must get Sage, with whom he has fallen in love, to obtain a recorded confession, which she does. Then, while Leo is preparing his case, Sage bakes a poisonous plant into a roll and gives it to Josef, fulfilling his request that she kill him. The next day, Sage goes to Josef's house with Leo, who is not surprised to find that such an elderly man has died. Sage is shocked, however, when she secretly learns that Josef was not Reiner Hartmann after all. Putting a few facts together, she realizes that Josef was actually Franz Hartmann and that he still retained Minka's story written on the backs of photos.



# Part I, Pages 163-191

## Summary

Josef's story continues. He tells Sage that he was demoted after the incident with his commanding officer and was later shot, which caused permanent nerve damage in his right arm that made it impossible for him to hold a rifle steady. He was sent to work at Auschwitz concentration camp and was surprised to find his brother Franz working there as an administrator. Since her grandmother was also at Auschwitz, Sage wonders if they ever met. When she leaves, she drives to Adam's house and sees him embracing his wife, which shakes Sage up and causes her to have a car accident on the way home. The next day, Sage is at home when a man comes to her door, introduces himself as Leo, and says he has a file on Reiner but still cannot be sure he and Josef are the same man. He says it would help to find an eyewitness who remembers him from the camp and Sage, hoping her grandmother will forgive her, says she thinks she knows someone who can help.

In the Ania story, Damian and Ania wonder whether the beast that is tearing people apart is an upior (the undead). Damian goes further, and suggests the killer might be Aleks. Although she does not want to believe it, Ania sets a trap and it appears that Aleks might in fact be an upior, but then they kiss and suddenly Damian and his soldiers burst into the cottage.

The next section is narrated from Leo's point of view. He finds himself very attracted to Sage and laments to himself that her scar makes her think she is not pretty. He muses that there are things in his file on Reiner that Sage does not know about and that could prove that Josef is really Reiner. Meanwhile, Sage tells him that she does not think her grandmother will talk to him, but they go to her condo anyway. At first Minka refuses to say anything about her Holocaust experiences, but then she relents. Sage asks her to start by telling them about her father.

## Analysis

The contrast between Leo and Adam continues to magnify in this section. Whereas earlier in the story Adam told Sage that no one would ever love her the way he does, which sounded more like a threat than a compliment, Leo immediately describes her as hot despite the scar she tries so hard to hide. Adam continues to be established as someone who is not truly committed to Sage but instead is an enabler and/or a manipulator, stringing her along and encouraging her to go forward with a life of hiding. The differences between the two men continue to both draw Sage in to the light - that is, the realities - of who they are, and at the same time, brings her further into the realities of who SHE is.



Meanwhile, the reference to the damage in Reiner's dominant arm is a small but significant clue to / foreshadowing of events that will transpire later (i.e. the revelation / Sage's realization of his true identity), while his move to Auschwitz reunites him with his brother Franz and also puts both men into the same sphere as Sage's grandmother, Minka.

Finally, the file on Reiner, which Leo reveals contains information he cannot share with Sage or anyone else, is similarly an important element that will come into play later. Here it's important to note that as Leo continues to educate Sage about the delicate process of chasing Nazis, which can take years or decades, the author's considerable research also educates the reader about the process.

## Discussion Question 1

When Sage goes to Adam's house, what specifically upsets her? How does this contradict what she has believed in the past?

## Discussion Question 2

In what ways do the Damien/Aleksander characters in the Ania story, and their relationship with Ania, parallel the Adam/Leo characters and their relationships with Sage?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Minka hesitates to tell her story? Why does she eventually agree to do so?

## Vocabulary

recoil, hubris, penal, irreparable, fetid, inequity, metaphor, cleave, apocalypse, corollary, dupe, compensate, cloister, sustenance, rapport, exclusive, reminiscent, apparatus, annihilation, culpable, masochist



# Part I, Pages 1-48

## Summary

Sage Singer, the lead character in Jodi Picoult's novel *The Storyteller*, makes an effort to hide from the world because she is self-conscious about the facial scar left from a car accident that killed her mother. She works the graveyard shift at a bakery, making delicious breads during the hours the shop is closed, and is involved with a married man, but her unlikely friendship with ninety-five year-old Josef Weber turns her life upside down. It turns out that Josef, who has a stellar reputation in their small New Hampshire town, was an officer at a Nazi concentration camp. His request that Sage help him die brings up old secrets and causes Sage to consider the true meaning of forgiveness.

Note: The book is not divided into relatively equal chapters, but rather into sections of widely-varying lengths that are told from the points of view of different characters. The book also contains a second narrative line that runs parallel to the main plot - a narrative eventually revealed to have been constructed by Sage's grandmother Milka. For these reasons, this guide has been divided by page numbers.

The book opens with an untitled prologue in which a girl named Ania describes the details of her father's death, revealing that he was a baker in a small village, that they were very close because his wife / her mother was dead, and that he father often gave her elaborate instructions about his funeral, although he was healthy and seemed invincible. Ania also describes how, on her eighteenth birthday, trouble started in the village when animals began dying unexpectedly. Baruch Beiler, the wealthy tax collector, said it was the work of a wild animal and if people paid the taxes they owed, they would be protected. Ania's father could not pay and Beiler threatened to take his home, on which he (Beiler) held the lien. Ania muses that her father trusted her with the details of his death but in the end, she was too late.

Part 1 of the novel proper begins with a section written from the perspective of Sage, a twenty-five year old baker attending the grief therapy support group she has gone to for the past three years. Narration reveals that her father died when she was nineteen and her mother three years later. She says she goes to the group not for therapy, but for punishment, adding that she is very aware of a puckered scar across her left eyelid and cheek. After the meeting, she talks with ninety-five year old Josef Weber, who is new to the group and whom she knows from his occasional visits to her bakery, *Our Daily Bread*, which is attached to a Catholic shrine and which is run by Sage's motherly best friend Mary with the help of barista Rocco. In narration, Sage recalls how former nun Mary was kind enough to hire her following the car accident that caused Sage's scar and apparently killed her mother six months later. Narration also reveals that Sage works overnight, making the bakery's products, then leaves in the morning, a schedule that suits her because it keeps her from having too much to do with people who might react badly to her scar.



One rainy day at closing time, shortly after the support group meeting where she met him, Sage chases Josef after he leaves the bakery in order to return the notebook he always carries and has left in the shop. Later, two things happen - Mary tells Sage that Josef is a wonderful man and a local legend, and Sage visits her boyfriend, Adam, a married funeral director, who concurs that Josef, who used to teach German and coach baseball, is a great guy. Sage, whose family is Jewish but not religious, reveals that she was twelve years old when she learned that her father's mother had been in a Nazi concentration camp.

Over time, Josef begins to visit the bakery each day as it's closing, and he and Sage become friends. For her part, Sage goes to his home often so he can teach her to play chess on a beautiful set made by his brother. Eventually he asks her to do him a favor (help him kill himself), revealing that he was a guard in a Nazi concentration camp.

## Analysis

The first section of *The Storyteller* introduces both of the novel's dual plots – the main story involving Sage and Josef and the parallel story of Ania. This is somewhat confusing in the beginning as it is unclear how the two stories are related, but it will be clarified later in the book.

Sage Singer, the book's main character, is also introduced in this section. She is in her mid-twenties and apparently pretty except for a glaring scar on her face that she desperately tries to hide with her hair, her body language, by working overnight in an empty bakery, and by dating a married man with whom she cannot be seen in public. The author hints that in addition to her scar, Sage also suffers from guilt involving an accident that caused both the scar and her mother's death. These hints become stronger when, in narration, Sage reveals that she still attends a grief support group three years after her mother's death not because she is still grieving, but because she considers it a form of punishment. Other important points to note about Sage include the fact that although she is untrained, she has a natural gift for baking various kinds of bread and has channeled them into a profession as a baker. Bread will be a theme throughout the book, symbolizing a number of things including family, shared connections, comfort and love. Perhaps most importantly, Sage's skill at baking plays a particularly important role in the book's climax, which means, in turn, that the references to her baking skills in this section serve as foreshadowing of later significant moments.

Meanwhile, Sage's friendship with ninety-five year-old Josef seems innocuous and sweet in the beginning, with two lonely people forming an unlikely bond out of shared experiences. Here it's interesting to note the initial ways in which their world views metaphorically parallel and/or mirror each other. For example, while Sage hides from the world, Josef apparently lives openly, becoming a well-known figure in the community through his teaching career, coaching baseball and other activities. On another level, however, they both keep parts of themselves secret and hidden - Sage keeps to herself because of her (guilt? shame? remorse?): about the accident, while Josef keeps his Nazi past similarly secret. Finally, Sage and Josef both have similar experiences with scars -





Sage's physical and emotional scars associated with the car accident, Josef's scars associated with his experiences as a Nazi prison guard.

Finally, the narratively parallel story of Ania contains several other sorts of parallels - the emotional parallels between Ania's and Sage's bread baking, the factual parallels of their respective dead parents, and perhaps most importantly, their parallel experiences with the evil of the Nazis.

## **Discussion Question 1**

Discuss Sage's grief therapy group. Why does she still attend even though it has been several years since her mother's death? Why does she describe her intention as going for "punishment"?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Discuss the ways in which Sage's job is both a comfortable fit and an unhealthy escape.

## **Discussion Question 3**

What is the basis for the friendship between Sage and Josef? Why do they get along well together despite the obvious differences between them?

## **Vocabulary**

fanfare, macabre, barricade, default, magnanimous, mercenary, protocol, communal, inviolable, tethered, paradox, oppressive, ricochet, reclusive, aphorism, prodigious, voluminous, erratic, tantalizing, unerring, anomaly, abridged, scrutinize, mesmerized, archaic, instigate



## Part 1, Pages 49-92

### Summary

In the Ania story, Ania finds herself in the village marketplace with one more baguette left to sell before she can return home to her father. A soldier named Damian teases her about buying it, but then kisses her and says that if she marries him, she will never have to worry about her father's unpaid taxes again. She runs away, but when she gets home she finds that her father has been brutally murdered.

The next section is told from Sage's perspective. Sage finds it hard to reconcile her image of Josef with the photo he shows her of a much younger man in a Nazi uniform, but she does not close the door on the idea of helping him die. She returns to the bakery, where a large crowd has gathered to see a loaf of bread Sage baked that seems to have the face of Jesus on it. Avoiding the crowds, Sage goes to the police station and tells a detective that Josef might be a Nazi, but he finds the idea incredible. She then goes to visit her grandmother, Minka, who survived being imprisoned in a Nazi prison camp. When Sage asks about that part of her life, Minka refuses to talk about it, saying her life began when she came to the U.S. While Sage is there, the detective calls and advises her to contact the FBI if she wants to pursue the story about Josef. Returning to the bakery, Sage destroys the Jesus Loaf.

In another section of the parallel story, Ania tries to keep the family bakery going after burying her father, but since several people have been brutally killed in the area, customers are few and she has no money to pay the taxes demanded by Baruch Beiler. Damian pays the taxes for her, then puts her hand on his crotch and says she owes him. She pushes him away, and another man, who keeps his mentally impaired brother on a tether, attacks Damian. As they fight, the brother runs away and the man follows, Damian shouting threats at their backs.

The next chapter introduces, and is told from the perspective of, Leo Stein, a divorced thirty-seven year-old attorney with the Justice Department's Office of Human Rights and Special Prosecutions in Washington, DC. Narration reveals that he gave up a lucrative career in corporate law because he has a passion for what he now does – building cases and prosecuting former Nazis – even though it is nearly impossible to do. Sage calls and tells him about Josef and although he is skeptical, a few things about her story intrigue him, as does her smoky voice. He Googles her and is surprised by two things - that she is young, and that there's a story online about her and the Jesus Loaf. He gives the information on Josef to his assistant, Generva, and is a little disappointed when she turns up no evidence to support Sage's claim.



## Analysis

In this section, the parallels between Ania's and Sage's stories become both more clear and more complex. In addition to bread and baking, there are also parallels between Ania's and Sage's experiences of soldiers, evil, and death. For example, in the Ania story Damian and his fellow soldiers run roughshod over the villagers, taking what and doing whatever they want, just as the Nazis in the Sage story did before and during World War II. Then: the murder of Ania's father foreshadows the many deaths in Sage's grandmother's family. Finally, the introduction of the presently unnamed brothers will be seen as paralleling and/or foreshadowing the introduction of another set of brothers in future chapters.

Meanwhile, the so-called Jesus Loaf is symbolic of the thematic thread having to do with religion that runs throughout the novel. For example, Sage is Jewish, but she has long ago turned her back on God and religion, and her Jewish heritage has meant little to her. She knows that her Jewish grandmother was in a concentration camp, but her grandmother has never offered to discuss it and Sage has never asked. By contrast, Sage's friend/boss Mary is a former nun who still has a deep faith even though she has left her order. She spends much of her free time tending to the garden at the Catholic shrine adjacent to her bakery, which bears the name Our Daily Bread, a name which itself has religious overtones, specifically Christian (i.e. from the so-called "Lord's Prayer", specifically the phrase "Give us this day our daily bread"). Mary's religious views, as well as those of Leo, will become important for Sage as she wrestles with her decision about killing Josef and the family secrets that will be revealed as the result of his death. When Sage destroys the loaf, she is again avowing her rebellion against God, religion and everything they stand for - perhaps most specifically, the qualities of mercy, forgiveness, and compassion that Jesus and his teachings are known for. The destruction of the Loaf, therefore, can be seen as metaphorically foreshadowing Sage's apparently conflicted perspectives on forgiveness and mercy in the novel's concluding moments.

Finally, this section introduces Leo, who has dedicated his career to pursuing and prosecuting Nazi soldiers. His immediate attraction to Sage foreshadows the growth of their relationship as the book progresses, while his easy sense of humor provides a light touch to balance the darkness that surrounds much of the plot. Here it's interesting to note a significant potential parallel between the two characters - in the same way as Leo pursues justice for the crimes committed by Nazis, in the final moments of the book (in which she follows through on Josef's request for him to kill her) Sage's actions can be interpreted as her pursuit of justice for the crimes he personally committed.

## Discussion Question 1

Why does Sage not immediately reject Josef's request to help him die?



## Discussion Question 2

What other aspects of Jesus and his teachings (i.e. the way both / either are described, either in the Bible or in Christian tradition) are symbolically relevant in the appearance of the Jesus Loaf? Why is Sage so disturbed by it?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Leo not dismiss Sage's claims out of hand? What is it about the case that intrigues him?

## Vocabulary

bravado, ambivalent, viscerally, emaciated, beacon, repository, relinquish, interrogate, authentic, psyche, antiquarian, tome, adhere, dismissive, languish, ravenous, extradite, conflate, laborious, expedition, caveat, pretense, fabricate, mundane



# Part I, Pages 93-162

## Summary

Sage arrives at work to find that Mary has hired another baker to take her place temporarily, telling Sage that her behavior has become erratic and she should take a week off. Sage tells Mary about Josef, but Mary does not believe her. Later she tells Adam they should take a break from their relationship. He agrees, but when he says no one will ever love her the way he does, she wonders if it is a vow or a threat. Later, Leo calls to tell her there is no record of Josef being a Nazi, so Sage goes to Josef's house and talks with him. He says he wants her to help him die because he has no one to live for, but he also wants Sage, as a Jew, to forgive him. She asks for proof of his claim and he tells her his real name – Reiner Hartmann – and his birthdate. She calls Leo and he finds a record of Reiner being a member of the Nazi party, but asks her to try to find out more.

In the parallel story, Ania is having a nightmare when the man who saved her from Damian comes to her home, introduces himself as Aleksander Lubov, and offers to bake for her. She hesitates, wondering why she would accept his offer. He seems to read her mind, responding, "Because you need me."

The next chapter is told from Josef's point of view. He describes the rise of Hitler and the ease with which he convinced the German people, who were struggling horribly from the effects of World War I, that the Jewish people were a threat to them. Narration also describes how Josef/Reiner's brother, Franz, was more intelligent but physically weaker, so their mother expected Reiner to protect him, particularly when both joined the Hitler Youth. That is where Reiner found his true strength, physically overpowering others, including his brother, and gaining admiration.

In the parallel story, Ania's narration reveals that Aleksander has been working for her for a week, and that his brother was born with a mental disability and needs to be watched constantly when he is awake. She and Aleksander discuss the fact that more people have been found brutally killed and speculate that it might not be an animal, but some sort of monster doing the killing. Ania comments that the only monsters she has known have been men.

The story returns to Sage, who has been listening to Josef's story and is sickened by it. When she calls Leo, he says the information is still not enough. This leads Sage to again visit her grandmother, Minka, and as they bake together, Sage urges her to share stories of her prison-camp past. Minka continues to resist, but eventually gives Sage the leather-bound notebook in which she has written the Ania story. Minka reveals this is the story that kept her alive, and Sage is engrossed when she reads it. Later she drives Josef to the grief group and, during the meeting, brings up the question of whether people should feel bad when someone horrible dies, naming Hitler as an example. Josef takes her aside during the break and becomes very angry, as he has told her his



story in confidence. After the meeting she drives him home, disgusted with him but keeping secret the fact that her grandmother was in a concentration camp with him.

In another part of the Ania story, Ania is attacked and badly injured as she walks through the woods, but Damian saves her. He takes her to her cottage, where Aleks stitches her up and takes care of her.

The next chapter is from Josef's point of view. He says he – Reiner -- continued to rise quickly in the Hitler Youth and soon enlisted in the army. On the night before he reported for duty, his youth group commander gathered all the boys and took them to a nearby town, where they destroyed all the Jewish businesses and terrorized the people. He describes how he began killing people immediately after joining the adult army, taking part in mass killings of Jews, Gypsies and other undesirables but drinking heavily at night to remove the images from his mind. At home on leave, he learned that his brother Franz was sneaking books to a Jewish friend. He demanded that he stop, but when he did not, Reiner drove the Jewish family out of town. Seeing the subsequent anger on his brother's face, he realized that although Franz was still studious and weak, he would be able to survive the war. Returning to duty, he continued killing and drinking, and one night when he was very drunk, he slept with the mistress of his commander and woke to find the man pointing a gun at his face and saying his career as an officer was over.

In the parallel story, Aleks presents Ania with one of the small rolls that her father used to make just for her.

## Analysis

In this section of the novel, the upheaval that has already begun in Sage's life continues when Mary forces her to take time off to pull herself together. This is the beginning of a period in which Sage must learn to live in the light of day, both literally and metaphorically – literally in the sense that she is forced out of her familiar pattern of sleeping/hiding during the day and emerging primarily in the darkness of night, metaphorically in the sense that she is forced into facing some important truths: about Josef/Reiner, about her grandmother, about her potential relationship with Leo, and, quite significantly, the borderline abusive relationship with Adam.

Meanwhile, one of the most important developments in this section is the revelation that Ania's story was actually written by Minka. This knowledge enables the reader to see even more parallels between the two narrative lines, and delve more deeply into both. For example, the reader can see how the author has set up the protective Aleksander and the vulnerable Casimir as parallels for Franz and Reiner, and how through them, brutality is now a common thread running through both stories. On another level, death is also starting to emerge as a theme at this point – or rather, parallels (some ironic) in how death is treated. On the one hand, the novel portrays the process of cremation in the concentration camps, where massive numbers of people are killed at once, while on the other it also portrays the careful process Adam follows in the cremation of a single person. Another important point to note is Minka's presentation of the journal to Sage,



which is a turning point in both the narrative as a whole and in Sage's personal transformation. A noteworthy point is the fact that the journal Minka gives Sage is not the original version of the Ania story, but rather one she rewrote at a later time. This functions on two levels: first, as a suggestion that Minka's views of her story and its themes might have evolved over time (in the same way as Sage's views of justice also evolve over time); and second, as a foreshadowing of other revelations (i.e. Josef's "rewriting" of his past and/or identity) near the novel's conclusion.

Finally: for the first time in the book, the narration comes from Josef's point of view as he tells his story to Sage. The portrait he paints of two very different brothers is clearly and vividly drawn – of Reiner, who had no difficulty assimilating into the Nazi movement, and of Franz, who was a much gentler soul and who loved literature and poetry. The very different natures of the two brothers play a significant role in the unfolding of the narrative in future chapters, and can be seen as having clear, vivid parallels with the brothers, Aleksander and Casimir, in Minka's Ania story.

## Discussion Question 1

How does Josef/Reiner justify his actions during the early part of the war?

## Discussion Question 2

Compare and contrast Reiner and Franz, as described by Reiner. What do they have in common and what sets them apart?

## Discussion Question 3

Why does Josef become so angry when Sage mentions Hitler in the grief group? Why do you think she brings up the topic?

## Vocabulary

cryptic, erratic, disengage, protrude, retrospect, cog, proxy, repentance, palpable, euphoric, diligent, onslaught, stigma, exalted, mull, abject, fathom, corroborate, implicate, renounce, macabre, conjoined, absolution, retribution, analogy



## Part II, Pages 192-264

### Summary

This section marks the beginning of Part II of the novel. In the Ania story, Damian savagely whips Aleks in the town square as everyone, including Ania, watches. Ania realizes that it does not matter if Aleks is guilty of being the killer or not because the village needs a scapegoat. Suddenly a soldier arrives and announces that there has been another murder – Baruch Beiler’s wife – and Beiler is missing. Clearly Aleks could not have been involved since both incidents just occurred, and in the confusion arising from the community's realization of this, he escapes.

At this point, Minka begins telling her story. She describes her childhood in Poland, where her father was a baker and where she and her older sister Basia, who was married and newly pregnant, worked in the family's bakery. Meanwhile, Minka and her best friend Darija dreamed of moving to London, where they would lead glamorous lives as a novelist and a publisher respectively. Minka was a good student who excelled in German and had a crush on her German teacher even though all the Jews feared the Germans at that point. She went on her first date and shared her first kiss with a boy named Josek, but the date was interrupted with SS soldiers burst in and began beating the people in the café, including Josek. A few days later she saw him again, at which point he revealed that he and his family had obtained Christian identification papers and were leaving Poland. He also reveals that he had gotten papers for her as well, but she refused to leave her family, even though she kept the papers. She did not tell her father about them because she knew he would force her to use them, an insight made clearer when he gave her a pair of boots with gold coins hidden in the heels, money that could be used in case the SS demanded money in exchange for safety, which officers often did. As the situation continued to deteriorate, Minka saw people being hanged or shot, and eventually both her family and Darija’s were forced to move to the small Jewish ghetto. At the same time, her story about Ania began to get darker and more sinister.

Minka then describes how everyone in the family had jobs in the ghetto, but there was nevertheless very little food . Eventually Basia’s young son Majer got sick, and when her husband Rubin got caught trading stolen bread for medicine, he was sent to prison. Desperate to keep him from being sent to Germany, Basia went to see the man who controlled the ghetto and gave him oral sex in return for sending Rubin to a Polish work camp instead of a German one. Later, Darija and Minka were sent to the German officers’ headquarters to work, where it was learned that Minka spoke German. She was then assigned to a textile workshop run by Herr Fassbinder, who was very kind to her. At the same time, Darija told Minka that the thousands of people who were being transported out of the ghetto each day were being killed, but Minka did not believe her. Eventually Minka’s mother was taken by the SS. A young boy who had been with her but escaped returned to the ghetto and told the family she had been among those killed in the gas chamber. This news left Minka's father something of an empty shell. Still later, the ghetto residents were asked to give up their children to help fill the growing quotas





for deportees, and soldiers began going door to door to collect them. Minka's family hid Basia and Majer in a crawl space and the soldiers did not find them, but after the soldiers left, Basia discovered that she had held Majer so tightly to keep him from coughing that she had smothered him. Afterward Basia jumped from the bridge Jews were not allowed to cross and was shot and killed in midair by SS soldiers.

## Analysis

As Minka begins to relate her story to Sage and Leo, the narrative paints a picture that begins with people leading ordinary lives that have, in many ways, clear and vivid parallels to the experiences of Sage, Leo and many other people – a stable family, delicious meals, a solid education, good friends and dreams of the future. The only significant detail about Minka's schooling that stands out is the fact that she excelled in German, a skill that would later become instrumental as the German army took over her country. The fact that she admired and even had a crush on her German teacher is both significant and poignant, given that he is not only the first German she meets, but that he also influences her future attitudes towards Germans, attitudes that, in turn, influence those developed by Sage which, in THEIR turn, influence her actions in relation to Josef/Reiner.

Other important elements in this section include Minka's portrait of a life that simultaneously shrinks and becomes more fearful as the Nazis' power grows, an experience that has a parallel in the main storyline as Sage's world and experiences become more and more defined by her experiences with Reiner, the Nazi influence in HER life. The final horrors in this section are the inadvertent killing of Basia's young son and Basia's subsequent death. The image of the latter is evocative of a death that is preferable to the slow deaths experienced by so many prisoners in the concentration camp, almost by Minka herself and, in the present day storyline, by Josef/Reiner.

Finally, in the parallel story of Ania, there continues to be uncertainty regarding whether Aleks is good or evil. While there is evidence that he is an undead upior, a murder takes place that he could not possibly have committed, thus shedding doubt on the true nature of his character. This experience of doubt and uncertainty can be seen as having a parallel in the Sage/present day storyline (see "Discussion Question 3").

## Discussion Question 1

Compare and contrast Minka's life in the beginning of her story with how she describes it at the end of this section. What changes have taken place physically, mentally and emotionally for her and her loved ones?

## Discussion Question 2

What is the significance of the new boots Minka's father bought for her?



## Discussion Question 3

How does Ania's uncertainty about Aleks's guilt parallel experiences of uncertainty in Sage's life / story?

## Vocabulary

dapper, traumatize, premium, intervene, phalanx, waft, wont, cosmopolitan, incur, vicarious, allegory, insightful, courtier, chivalrous, tarnish, persecute, apparition, diffuse, circuitous, missive, dire



## Part II, Pages 265-358

### Summary

The parallel story of Ania continues as she witnesses what appears to be a wild man consuming what is clearly the last of Baruch Beiler. When she confronts him about his actions, he calls her a hypocrite because she wanted Beiler dead. In response, she reminds the man that he killed her father too and attacks him. Aleksander appears and stops her, revealing that the other man is his brother Casimir, whom he says is feeble-minded and always has a leather mask over his face because he eats things he should not. Running away, Ania sobs that Casimir murdered the only person who ever loved her, but Aleks says he (Ania's father) was not the only person to ever love her. He also confesses that he, not Casimir, is behind her father's death - in other words that he, Aleks, is the upior.

As the narrative returns to Minka's story, Minka describes how people disappeared from the ghetto routinely, and how those who remained went on living. But one day, she says, Darija was gone and soon afterwards, she (Minka) and her father were put on the list for deportation. The following day, she and her father, who was very weak, were put on the train to Auschwitz. Once they arrived, Minka was immediately separated from her father. Later, she says, she found out he had been gassed that first day. She then describes how devastated she was when she arrived and had her boots (which contained both her Christian papers and the coins her father had given her) taken away. On the other hand, she says, she was reunited with Darija. She tells how she lived with hundreds of other women in a squalid barracks and was surrounded by death, and how from time to time she saw a soldier whose right hand had a marked twitch. She also describes how she and Darija were assigned to go through the personal items of the prisoners, giving anything valuable to the SS officers and destroying the rest. Among the guards in this area, she adds, was one she secretly called Herr Dybbuk after an old neighbor who was too weak to force out the evil that had taken up residence inside him. She says that in an overheard conversation, she learned that he was related to the guard with the hand tremor, who seemed to be purely evil. One day, she says, she came across her father's suitcase among the belongings and, realizing he was truly dead, fell apart. Expecting a severe beating, she was surprised when "Herr Dybbuk" asked to whom the suitcase belonged and, when told it was her father's, simply told her to get back to work.

In time, Minka says, she learned the best ways to survive in the camp, adding that although she was afraid at first, she began quietly stealing photographs from the belongings of the dead prisoners, feeling that as long as she remembered them, they were still in some way alive. One prisoner was named Ania, the same as the girl in her story. Minka then describes how she began telling her own Ania story, at first just to Darija but later to all the women in her barracks. She describes how it enthralled them, giving them a reason to live for another day so they could hear what happened next. At the same time, Minka says, she began to write the story on the back of the photos, the only paper she had. She describes how, as the result of an officer finding the photos in



her bunk, Minka was taken out for punishment, but when her fluency in German was revealed, "Herr Dybbuk", whose name turned out to be Franz, took her to his office. There his brother Reiner suggested that he (Franz) planned to use her for sex. Franz, however, was interested in the story written on the backs of the photos and made Minka his secretary, giving her a notebook and pen and instructing the guard not to take them from her. When he returned her to her quarters that night, he told her to write ten more pages by the next day. Minka describes how this pattern continued for months, with Minka reading her story to Franz as he ate lunch, subtly leaving extra food lying around for her. He also, Minka says, asked many questions about the story, mostly about the brothers, Aleks and Casimir, and if it was possible for one to be evil and the other not, which Minka says made her realize that he saw the story as an allegory about Reiner and himself. At one point, she adds, Franz saved her life by abruptly sending her to the hospital when a high-ranking officer visited the camp and killed all the Jews with privileged jobs like Minka's, bringing her back when the officer left.

Minka goes on to describe how one day, while Franz was out getting his lunch, she arranged to bring Darija to the office to warm up for a few minutes, and how when they arrived, they saw Reiner stealing money from Franz's safe. When Franz arrived, Minka says, Reiner said it was the girls who had been stealing, shooting and killing Darija. At that point, Minka says, Franz beat her, and made her think she had been wrong to begin to trust him. She adds, however, that as she was being loaded into a truck to travel to another camp, a guard slipped her a note from Franz, which said "What happens next." Then, she adds, although many women died during a long forced march, she managed to escape, but was soon recaptured again and sent to another camp, Bergen-Belsen. There she became weaker and weaker, being near death when the British army arrived and freed the prisoners.

Minka concludes by telling Sage and Leo that she never told her story because even for a writer, it would be impossible to convey properly. She adds that if you lived through it, you would know there are no words to describe it, and if you did not, you would never understand.

## Analysis

Much of this section is difficult reading as Minka describes the horrors of Auschwitz. In terms of the various narrative elements that come into play, however, the crux of this section is the gradual development of the relationship among Minka, Franz, and Reiner. There are several key points here. The first has to do with Minka giving Franz the nickname "Herr Dybbuk", a name that refers to a Jewish myth in which an evil creature inhabits the soul of a dead person. This clearly parallels events and/or circumstances in the Ania storyline, in which Casimir is portrayed as being "possessed" by evil and Aleks is revealed to be an upior, itself an evil undead spirit. A related point is how Franz makes the situation more ironic by discussing other mythical beasts with Minka, one of which is the Donestre, which kills and devours its prey but later weeps beside the prey's severed head. When Minka suggests that some beasts might still have a conscience, Franz immediately sees a relationship to himself and his brother Reiner, a relationship



that the reader, in turn, can see as relating to Reiner's situation (i.e. seeking both forgiveness and death) in the present day storyline. Meanwhile, the narrative also makes clear that the striking parallels between his relationship with Reiner and the relationship between Casimir/Aleks (in the Ania story) are not lost on Franz, who is similar to Aleks in that he still has a conscience, or at least (thinks? hopes? believes?) he does. Reiner and Casimir are, on the other hand, pure evil and experience no remorse for the horrible crimes they commit. Here it's interesting to note how Franz increases the differences between himself and Reiner by, in general, behaving more compassionately - leaving extra food in for her in his office, and later sending her to the hospital on a day when more privileged prisoners like herself are being killed. Throughout this time, however, his primary interest is in Minka's story and in particular, knowing how it ends. In other words, is he being truly compassionate or just selfish? The narrative leaves it up to the reader to decide.

Another important point to note about this section is the amount of symbolism it contains. For example, Minka's boots function on two symbolic levels - as metaphoric representations of both her former life and a future. that turns out to be coming to nothing. The photos she collects from prisoners' belongings also function on two levels - as symbols of the lost and/or dying past they represent, and also of a kind of hope for the future, specifically Minka's determined hope (or hopeful determination) that the names and faces in the photos will be remembered. Her story about Ania itself becomes a similar lifeline to the future for her, for her fellow prisoners, and in a way for Franz, all of whom are desperately struggling to find meaning, sanity, and hope in an insane situation that seems to be without meaning OR hope.

Finally, there are one or two important questions that arise from the actions of various characters that are never entirely answered by the narrative. This section contains one such questions - specifically, the question of why, in their last encounter, Franz beats Minka so savagely when he has shown her many kindnesses throughout their unusual relationship. There are a few possibilities: perhaps he is angry that she has placed him in a position in which he must confront his brother for killing Darija, or perhaps it has to do with Franz keeping her away from Reiner and the possibility that he might kill her, given that she's about to be moved to another camp. See "Discussion Question 3".

## Discussion Question 1

Why was Franz so interested in Minka's story about Ania? What might the parallels between her story and his life have told him about how to survive and/or live in his current circumstances?

## Discussion Question 2

Why did Minka tell Sage, earlier in the novel, that the Ania story kept her alive?



## Discussion Question 3

What do you think is the most likely reason Franz beat Minka after Reiner killed Darija? Why?

## Vocabulary

rasp, haunch, extort, convoluted, inevitable, atrophy, chronic, discern, disembark, euphoric, sporadic, litany, quarantine, fester, infraction, confiscate, incessant, usurp, gustatory, vigilant, incinerate, ample, obliterate, furtive, contraband



## Part III, Pages 359-405

### Summary

Part III of the book opens with another section of the Ania story. Ania asks Aleks if he plans to kill her but he says he is doing what he can to save her, although it's difficult, he adds, to fight the urges that drive him. He goes on to say that after he attacked Ania's father, he knew he must find a way to protect others, so he asked to work for her. She looks at the many scars on his body, thinks about the rosy tint to the bread he bakes, thinks about how he begs her to eat all of the special roll he makes her each day, and recalls the story that the only way to be immune to an upior is to consume its blood. She puts the pieces of the puzzle together and realizes he has been baking his own blood into the bread to save everyone from himself.

The next chapter is narrated from Sage's perspective. She recalls that her grandmother (Minka) has survived not only the Holocaust but also cancer, having had a radical mastectomy. Meanwhile, as Minka prepares for bed, she tells Sage about meeting the man who would become her (Minka's) husband, adding that despite his urging, she could not take part in Holocaust survivor groups. Minka also describes how she came to hate Franz because he made her lose the compassion she had for the enemy (which arose because of her childhood friendship with Germans), and says that believing that all Germans were the same made her no better than they were.

After he and Sage leave, Leo says he is arranging to have some photos delivered to him and that when they arrive, he will show them to Minka and see if she can identify Josef/Reiner. As they talk, Sage breaks into sobs as she thinks about her grandmother's story and how she spends her own life hiding from others. Instead of taking her home, Leo takes Sage to a synagogue, where evening services are taking place. There she realizes that she is hearing the same words her grandmother grew up with, and that if the Nazis had prevailed, none of the people in the synagogue with her there. Afterward, she and Leo go to a café, where they run into Adam and his wife. Leo sizes up the situation and pretends to be dating Sage, implying that they are going home to have sex. This prompts Adam to call Sage the next morning and say he wants to resume their affair. Later, Sage goes to Josef's (Reiner's) house and asks him about his job at the camp, but he is vague about his duties. Eventually she leaves in anger, saying she hopes he lives a long time so his sins can eat away at him. Afterward she goes to Our Daily Bread, where word of the Jesus Loaf is still bringing in customers. She gets Mary's permission to use the kitchen, but while she is waiting for her bread to bake she works the cash register and chats with customers rather than hiding in the back as she usually does.

In a short Ania section, she and Aleks make love, Aleks revealing that each time he killed and ate someone, it became easier. They do not realize that Damian is listening and slips away to capture Casimir.



In a chapter narrated from Leo's point of view, Leo describes his growing realization that he is attracted to Sage for many reasons. He engages in casual banter with her when he picks her up, and as they go to Minka's house, it's revealed that the item Sage baked in Our Daily Bread's kitchen is the special roll Minka's father used to make just for her. When they arrive, Leo shows Minka an array of photographs and although it is painful for her, she identifies Reiner as the man who killed Darija. Back in the car, Leo explains to Sage that Reiner's file contains information that no one else knows – the fact that he was disciplined for killing a female prisoner without cause and Minka has confirmed this. Sage's phone rings and she learns that Josef has been admitted to the hospital.

## Analysis

There are several key elements in this section. The first is the newly revealed parallel between Sage and her grandmother - specifically, the fact that they both have scars. In both cases, the scar is evidence of something that is missing and/or had been taken from the women's lives, but in Sage's case, there is the clear sense that she, unlike her grandmother, has yet to focus on what she has left rather than what she has lost.

Another key element is the clear and vivid contrast between Leo and Adam. While it becomes obvious that Adam wants Sage more when he believes she is seeing someone else - in other words, that his desire for her has more to do with her being a possession - it's also becoming clear that Leo's desire has more to do with who she is as a person, and as a woman. Meanwhile, Leo's pretense that they are, in fact, already in a relationship foreshadows the evolution of their actual relationship as the book continues.

Then there is the scene in which Leo takes Sage to the synagogue, meaningful for several reasons. The first is that it provides insights into, and/or developments in, both their characters. While Sage has long abandoned any of the practices of the Jewish faith, she finds comfort in the comforting but unfamiliar words that constitute the service, and more importantly, discovers connections between her grandmother and the others who suffered under the Nazi regime. This section also provides both Sage and the reader with insight into Leo's connection with his own Jewish faith and his compassion for others. Both these discoveries serve as triggers for Sage and Leo to develop and deepen their relationship, as they discover similar connections with the past and its role in shaping the present.

Meanwhile, bread makes another appearance, simultaneously straightforward and symbolic, in this section - specifically, as Sage carefully bakes a roll for her grandmother, the same recipe (filled with chocolate and cinnamon) that Minka's father, a baker, made for her as a child and which she incorporated into the Ania story. Here it's important to note that there is no recipe, so Sage makes it from instinct, defining a connection to her grandmother, and to the great-grandfather who died at Auschwitz, that goes beyond the physical / genetic. This, in turn, can also be seen as reinforcing / representing Sage's discovery of connections with the past in general and with her heritage in particular.





Finally, Sage continues her gradual emergence into (light? freedom? truth? health?) by helping at Our Daily Bread while waiting for her dough to rise, something she would never have done previously. There is the clear sense that a combination of influences - the effect of her grandmother's story, Leo's patience / compassion / faith - is slowly bringing about changes that enable Sage to open herself up to others.

## **Discussion Question 1**

What is the significance of the special roll with the cinnamon and chocolate filling?

## **Discussion Question 2**

Compare and contrast the brothers in Ania's story with Franz and Reiner.

## **Discussion Question 3**

Why does Leo take Sage to the synagogue? What significance does the service have for her? What significance does it have for him?

## **Vocabulary**

rein, radical, traipse, comprehend, vested, extradite, delusion, reprehensible, corroborate, vintage, intact, contingent, isolation, wistful, snide, apathetic, pretense, exquisite, cacophony, array, miffed, magnitude, logistical, understatement, infraction



## Part III, Pages 406-460

### Summary

In another chapter of the Ania story, she and Aleks watch from behind some shrubbery as Damian announces to the town that the murderous upior has been caught. After Damian beheads Casimir, Aleks rushes forward and takes down all the other soldiers before catching up with Damian and ripping out his heart.

The next section, which is told from Sage's point of view, begins when she and Leo go to the hospital to see Josef. Sage learns that he purposely took a combination of drugs that would interact and kill him, in spite of his belief that he cannot die. She also learns that Josef met her mother once and had planned to ask her to help him die, but he never reconnected with her. When Leo takes Sage home, she finds that Adam is waiting. When he asks her to marry him, she sends him away, this time permanently. She goes to bed, and awakens to find Adam shaking her. When he tells her that her grandmother has died in her sleep, Sage wonders if the stress of telling her story contributed to her death. At the funeral home, Sage asks for a moment alone with Minka and puts concealer over her prison identification tattoo.

In another part of the Ania story, Aleks is brought to the village square each day and brutally punished for what he did to Damian, but being an upior, he cannot die. Ania goes to a library and learns that there are actually a number of ways to kill an upior, including slicing open its heart to release the blood of its victims.

The next section is told from Leo's perspective, as he comforts and supports Sage through Minka's funeral and burial. When he takes her back to his hotel after the shiva proves too much for her to handle, she brings out Minka's notebook and reads the Ania story to him. It ends with the imprisonment of Aleks but doesn't end, since Minka never actually wrote a conclusion, meaning that there is the possibility that Ania will kill Aleks out of mercy. Afterwards, Leo kisses Sage, and they make love. The next morning, Leo tries to push Sage away because their involvement is a conflict of interest. He also tells her that it might still be possible to prosecute Josef if she can wear a wire and get him to talk about killing Darija. She agrees and he gives in to resuming their sexual relationship.

In the parallel story, Ania poisons a guard and sneaks in to see Aleks, who asks her to kill him. This is the last of the Ania story.

The book's final chapter is told from Sage's point of view and takes place three days later. Leo and his colleagues have put the wire system in place in time for Sage to pick Josef up from the hospital. In his house, she asks him to tell her the worst thing he ever did and he describes killing Darija, adding that his brother turned him in for the offense and saying they never spoke again. Leo is thrilled and asks Sage to move to DC with him, but she neither agrees nor disagrees. Sage talks to Mary about the concept of



forgiveness and Mary says forgiving is something you do for yourself, not the offender. Sage then bakes a poisonous plant from Mary's garden into a roll and takes it to Josef, but before he eats it, he tells her that in truth, the worse thing he ever did was letting his brother die when he choked on some cherries as they were fleeing after the war. Even worse, he regrets not doing it sooner. Josef eats the roll and slowly dies, but not before Sage tells him she will never forgive him. His last words are "How does it end?"

The next day, Sage and Leo go to Josef's house to arrest him. There they find him dead on the floor where Sage left him. He is still wearing his hospital bracelet, which lists his blood type as B+, but Sage remembers seeing Reiner's listed in Leo's file as AB. This leads her to realize Josef was not Reiner after all. As the police and paramedics are coming, Sage goes to his bedroom, where she finds Josef's notebook in his bedside table. It contains the photos with Minka's story written on the back and she realizes Josef was actually Franz. He has also written more than a dozen different endings to the story of Ania and Aleks. Sage slips the journal into her bag. Later, when Leo asks if she found anything, she realizes that he lives in a world of black and white, so she says no.

## Analysis

The book's most surprising twist takes place in the final pages as it is revealed that Josef Weber is not in fact Reiner, as he claimed, but actually Franz. There are two key points to note about this event. The first is that the author did include a few clues that might lead the reader to this conclusion earlier, and which support the twist ending (i.e. make it, on one level, make sense). These include earlier references to blood types, the tremor in Reiner's hand (which was never mentioned in relation to Josef), and the fact that Josef had difficulty recounting the specific nature of his duties at Auschwitz. The second point to note is perhaps more significant, in that there is little or no explanation in the narrative as to why Franz pretended to be Reiner. Here it might perhaps be useful to consider all the revelations in this final section within the context of knowing Josef's true identity.

For example, Josef initially tells Sage that the worst thing he did, still pretending to be Reiner, was killing Darija, and that he, again still pretending to be Reiner, was turned in to the authorities by Franz. Knowing that Josef is in fact Franz, this means that Franz turned Reiner in to the authorities, a circumstance that suggests Reiner was punished. Does Franz feel guilty about this? The narrative doesn't say. Later, when Josef tells Sage about the cherries, knowledge of Josef's true identity means that it was Reiner who died as he and Franz were "fleeing the war". Although the narrative never explains how Reiner got from (presumably) being punished for killing Darija to escaping with his brother, the narration of the incident does suggest why Josef/Franz wants to die - again, he is unable to forgive himself for not being there for his brother who, as the narrative suggests, had been there for Franz (at the order of their mother). In other words, Franz feels guilty for betraying his brother, perhaps not only once (i.e. not helping him as he choked on the cherries) but twice (i.e. telling the truth of what happened to Darija). This, theoretically, could explain why he wanted to die: his guilt, which perhaps translates into



Franz seeing himself as something of an upior, a monster who has survived at the expense of other lives (i.e. Reiner's). This idea is supported by two things: his contention that he feels he is unable to die, and another parallel with the Ania story. Like Aleks (an actual upior), Josef asks for help to die.

The question remains, though, why Franz passed himself off as his more evil brother. Perhaps it was because he felt he was equally to blame for the atrocities, or perhaps it was because he thought Sage would be more inclined to kill him if he portrayed himself as the more evil brother. Either way, because the narrative doesn't make it clear, there is no real way to know.

Finally, there is the use of the phrase "How does it end?". This functions on at least three levels - as the honest question of a dying man who doesn't know what comes next, as a similarly honest question of a guilty man (or, at least, of a man who FEELS guilty) begging for forgiveness, and as the honest plea of a man desperate to know the ending of an unfinished story that has haunted him all his life ... or rather, a pair of stories: the story of Ania, and the story of the girl who wrote it. There is significant irony here, in that the reader knows (but Josef doesn't) that the girl survived and had a (relatively) happy life. There is further irony in the fact that at the end, although she uses a poisonous plant from Mary's shrine garden to kill Josef and also withholds her forgiveness in his dying moments, Sage will, the novel suggests, eventually forgive him. This conclusion can be based on two things - her conversation with Mary about the concept of forgiveness, and her reaction to the discovery of Josef's true identity. In short, the ending makes it clear that Sage, despite the dark circumstances in which she both began and ended the narrative, is emerging from her self-imposed exile and building relationships with herself, her history, and her future.

## Discussion Question 1

What is the significance of the question "How does it end?" Include discussion of both the Ania story and the main plot.

## Discussion Question 2

Why do you think Sage bakes the poisonous plant into the roll that she gives Josef? Is she killing him out of revenge for what she thinks he did to her grandmother and to other prisoners/victims? Or is she acting out of compassion and giving him the peace he longs for?

## Discussion Question 3

Why do you think Josef pretended to be Reiner and confess to crimes he did not actually commit?



## Vocabulary

atone, chafe, apprehend, proximity, incriminate, subsist, cavalier, vise, collateral, chameleon, anteroom, obliterate, cleave, precedent, unobtrusively, discretion, allay, sublimate, caveat, infraction, shun, amiable, solicit



# Characters

## Sage Singer

Sage Singer is a twenty-five year-old woman living in a small town in New Hampshire. Although she has no formal training, she is a naturally gifted baker and works overnight making bread for a bakery called Our Daily Bread. The hours suit her because she tries to avoid being in public in an effort to hide a scar on her face that is the result of a car accident three years earlier which also caused injuries that indirectly led to her mother's death. Although Sage is Jewish, she long ago abandoned any religious beliefs and does not consider herself a Jew. She is also having an affair with a married man, another way she punishes herself and hides out because she does not believe anyone could really love her completely. Over the course of the narrative, encounters with several other characters and situations challenge her ways of perceiving herself, her faith, and her world. These challenges lead her to take steps towards becoming more open to public experiences, feeling less guilty about the car accident, more sensitive to both her faith and its history, and more open to the possibility of a healthy relationship with a man who accepts and/or loves her for her positive qualities.

The most significant character Sage encounters is an elderly man named Josef, whose revelation that he was a guard at a Nazi concentration camp during the Second World War, and whose request that he needs her forgiveness and her help to die, leads her to profound, life-changing insights into guilt, forgiveness, and compassion. As a result of learning more about Josef's personal past and the effects his actions, Sage comes to realize that compassion can take many forms. In other words, she discovers / realizes that while it's possible to see the actions of Josef and his fellow Nazis as purely black, destructive and soul-less, he (and perhaps even others like him) struggled with their own demons and doubts ... that they were, in spite of the atrocities they were forced to commit, ultimately as human as those whose lives they destroyed, seemingly without any kind of compassion at all. This, in turn, leads her to have more compassion for herself.

## Josef Weber/Franz Hartmann

Josef Weber is a ninety-five year-old German immigrant who lives in the same small New Hampshire as the novel's central character (see "Sage Singer", above). He is portrayed as a pillar of the community, having taught German at the local high school, coached baseball, and done a number of other things that have made him a grandfather-like figure well-known in the town. His has no children and is alone since his wife's death. The narrative suggests that before they meet, Sage is aware of his history and relationship with the town, but has no personal connection to him. After he and Sage meet, however, Josef reveals that he has a horrific past: he was an officer in the German army during World War II, that his real name is Reiner Hartmann, and that he committed brutal killings and other crimes, including killing her grandmother's best friend



in cold blood. He attempts to enlist Sage's help in ending his life, explaining to her that he is only able to die as the result of the action of another. He is portrayed as, and is perceived by Sage as, riddled with both guilt and remorse: this, Sage and the reader both come to believe, is the reason why he feels the need to die.

At the novel's conclusion, after Sage has indeed helped him to end his life (without, it seems, his actually being aware of her doing so), the narrative reveals that it is not actually Reiner but rather his conflicted brother Franz who has been masquerading as Josef, hiding in plain sight for decades. While the narrative never makes it entirely clear why Josef chooses to initially tell Sage he is Reiner, there is the sense, as the novel concludes, that he did not believe she would help him die if she knew the truth – that he was in fact Franz, and in his relative innocence, perhaps less worthy of death that Reiner would be.

## Leo Stein

Leo Stein is a thirty-seven year-old graduate of Harvard Law School who gave up a lucrative career in corporate law to work for the Department of Justice. He now lives in Washington DC working for the department's Office of Human Rights and Special Prosecutions, where he tracks down and prosecutes former Nazis. A practicing Jew, he is highly dedicated to his work, although it is difficult and tedious. He becomes involved in the book's plot when Sage calls him to report Josef's confession to being a former SS officer. He serves as a powerful contrast to Sage in several ways: he is an observant, practicing Jew, where Sage is not; he sees the relationship between the Jews and the Nazis as black and white (i.e. the former as victims, the latter as destroyers) while Sage, as the result of hearing her grandmother Minka's story (see below) and learning more about Josef, comes to see the relationship as being not so clearly defined; and, perhaps most importantly, he is secure in his own skin and his own life, clear about who he is, what he wants, and what he believes. Sage, for many reasons, is much less secure on all these levels. Leo, his character and actions, can therefore be seen as having a catalytic influence on Sage - that is, as triggering reconsideration, transformation, and change.

## Minka Singer

Minka Singer is Sage's paternal grandmother. A Polish Jew, she was a prisoner at Auschwitz concentration camp during World War II and knew both Franz and Reiner Hartmann there. She reluctantly agrees to tell her story to Sage and Leo because it might help them prosecute Josef/Reiner. When she confirms Josef's claim that he's Reiner (even though he is, in fact, Franz), she triggers both an intensification of Leo's pursuit of Reiner for war crimes and a deepening of Sage's self-questioning about the nature of forgiveness. Minka is also the author of a narrative that parallels the main Sage-Leo-Josef/Reiner story, a semi-autobiographical portrait of life under the autocratic, murderous Nazi regime. This parallel narrative plays out through the lives and experiences of the characters Ania (a thinly disguised portrait of Minka herself) and



the brothers Aleks and Casimir, who evolve into parallel characters to Reiner and Franze Hartmann. Minka is, in fact, "The Storyteller" of the book's title.

## **Mary DeAngeles**

Mary DeAngeles is a former nun who now owns Our Daily Bread, the bakery where Sage Singer works. Still a devout Catholic, she spends her free time tending to the garden at the adjacent shrine. She serves as a friend and confidante to Sage, particularly when it comes to Sage's questions about faith and forgiveness. Mary's responses trigger new awareness, insight, and understanding in Sage as she struggles to come to terms with new truths and discoveries associated with her relationship with Josef, the story told by Minka, and the romantic relationships offered by both the married, possessive Adam and the single, passionate Leo.

## **Rocco**

Rocco is the barista at Our Daily Bread and speaks only in haiku.

## **Adam Lancaster**

Adam Lancaster is a local funeral director who is having an affair with Sage even though he is married. His attitude towards her is possessive, controlling, and manipulative, a clear and vivid contrast to that of Leo, who seems to be much more interested in Sage as who she is, rather than as something to be controlled.

## **Characters in Minka's story**

The Storyteller has a parallel plot that consists of a piece of fiction written by Minka before, during and after her time at Auschwitz. Characters in that story include Ania (a character who is similar to / a representation of Minka herself), Ania's father (paralleled in many ways to Minka's own father), and brothers Aleksander and Casimir (whose story and identities come to parallel those of the Nazi brothers Franz and Reiner Hartmann).

## **Pepper and Saffron**

Pepper and Saffron are Sage's sisters.

## **Geneva Astanopoulos**

Geneva Astanopoulos is a historian and researcher who works with Leo at the Department of Justice.





# Symbols and Symbolism

## Sage's Scar

Sage has a visible scar at the corner of her eye that extends downward to her cheek. It is the result of an auto accident that eventually caused her mother's death, and is a symbol of the extreme guilt Sage feels about her mother's death, representing how unhappy she feels about herself (i.e. that she's ugly and guilty). The scar forms the basis of her excuse for hiding from the world.

## Josef's Chess Set

Josef has a beautifully carved chess set in which the pieces are various mythical creatures. Playing chess together is the activity that brings Sage and Josef together as friends, but the set itself is much more symbolic, in that the mythical creatures of the chess set can be seen as paralleling the mythical creatures that serve as the characters in Minka's story, characters that fascinate and torment Franz/Josef for most of his life. The set can also be seen as symbolizing and/or embodying the "games" that Sage and Josef play with each other over the course of the narrative - the "game" of lies and misdirections that Josef plays in order to get Sage to help him die, and the "game", played by Sage and Leo, of searching for the truth (i.e. the tactics, obstacles, and victories that are employed) about Josef's past.

## Jesus Loaf

The Jesus Loaf is a loaf of bread baked by Sage at Our Daily Bread, the bakery where she works. It is so named because when sliced, it seems to reveal the face of Jesus. It brings attention to the bakery that is welcomed by Catholic owner Mary but scorned by Sage, who disavows all facets of religion. This causes her to destroy the Loaf. The fact that the Loaf seems to show the face of a spiritual leader who taught, among other things, the value of forgiveness and compassion, is an important and symbolic foreshadowing of a significant aspect of Sage's transformation and / or growth over the course of the narrative.

## A14660

A14660 is Minka's prisoner number from Auschwitz. It is tattooed on her arm and is a permanent symbol and reminder of the horror she and other Jews endured there, including her connection to Reiner and Franz. For Sage (and arguably for Leo), the number serves as a reminder of past horrors associated with being Jewish and how, like the tattoo remains on the body, the memory of those horrors remains in the mind of those who suffered them - and, in the case of Josef/Reiner, those who perpetrated them. The fact that Sage covers the tattoo with concealer at the funeral home after



Minka's death suggests that now her life is over, Minka is truly free from the dark influences on her life represented by the tattoo.

## Minka's Boots

Not long before they are taken to Auschwitz, Minka's father unexpectedly gives her a pair of boots with heels that detach, revealing a secret compartment that contains some gold coins (which he tells her to use if she needs to bribe soldiers) and the false Christian papers that she has secretly received (which could convince those same soldiers that she is not a Jew). The boots represent a means of escape that Minka does not take advantage of (i.e. a hopeful future), and her last connection to her father and the civilized life they once shared (i.e. a loving, peaceful past).

## Hair

When prisoners arrive at Auschwitz, their heads are immediately shaved. Losing their hair represents the loss of their humanity.

## Kanada

Kanada is the section of Auschwitz to which Minka and Darija are assigned. It is the section where the prisoners' belongings were sorted and valuables removed. The prisoners ironically nicknamed it Kanada because they imagined Canada as a land of plenty, a title that on another level proves straightforward (i.e. not ironic) in that Minka obtains the materials (i.e. photos obtained from prisoners) that enable her to write down her story (see "Prisoners' Photographs") below.

## Bread

Bread is a symbolic element that is woven throughout all three narratives in *The Storyteller* (the present day narrative, the World War II narrative, and the Ania narrative). Sage is a baker, as was her great-grandfather. In the World War II narrative, Minka also bakes bread, while in the Ania story, both Ania and her father are bakers. It is a symbol of many things, including hunger and plenty, love and family, and in Sage's final use of it as the means of ending Josef's life, either a symbol of revenge or compassion, depending on how Sage's actions are interpreted. It could also be seen as a representation of sacrifice, given that Jesus (whose face appears in *The Jesus Loaf* - see above) used bread in his Last Supper as a symbol of his body, about to be sacrificed for the good/redemption of humanity.



## Prisoners' Photographs

While sorting the belongings of her fellow prisoners, Minka secretly keeps the photos she finds of people's family members. At first she does so because they represent lives lost, and she wants to help those people live on in someone's memory. Later, they become the only source of paper for writing down her fictional story. The narrative eventually reveals that after the war, Franz kept them not for the photos, but for the story written on the back that keeps him obsessed until his death. On both levels, the photographs can be seen as representing positive values (i.e. hope) that continue in spite of the destructive horrors of the War and internment camps.

## Bride

Minka and the other prisoners are surprised to see a woman arrive at the concentration camp still dressed in her full bridal attire. Rather than making them depressed, they see it as a sign of hope because it means that somewhere outside the camps, life is going on normally. On another level, while Sage and Leo don't actually get married, the appearance of the bride can be seen as symbolic foreshadowing of the relationship they enter into with each other. In that vein, the bride could even be seen as symbolic foreshadowing of Sage entering a new life, a new phase of self-awareness and self-discovery, in the same way as a bride does.

# Settings

## Westerbrook, New Hampshire

Most of the book takes place in Westerbrook, a small town in New Hampshire that is home to Sage, her grandmother Minka, and Josef. Within the town, various scenes take place at Our Daily Bread bakery (where Sage and Mary work), the Our Lady of Mary Catholic Shrine (which is adjacent to the bakery and is the site of Mary's garden), Sage's house, Josef's house, Minka's home, and the funeral parlor where Adam works.

## Auschwitz

Auschwitz was a concentration camp run by Nazi occupiers for the purpose of housing and, in many cases exterminating, Polish Jews and others the regime considered undesirable. Sage's grandmother, Minka, was a prisoner there, and Josef (known at the time as Franz Hartmann) was a guard there. Much of the story is comprised of memories and/or descriptions of the horrors both characters saw and endured while in Auschwitz, and many of the flashback sections of the narrative (i.e. the sections set in the past) take place there.

## Lodz, Poland

Lodz is a large city in Poland and the childhood home of Minka and her family. The early stages of Minka's story of her life - that is, the time before the Nazis took over - take place there.

## Washington, DC

Leo lives and works in Washington, DC, capital of the United States, and a few of the novel's early scenes take place at his home and office there before he travels to New Hampshire.



# Themes and Motifs

## Moral Choices

The overriding theme of *The Storyteller* is the concept of moral choices. The book explores how much choice people actually have when it comes to moral issues and how those choices are made and/or justified. The reader must grapple with not only whether an inherently good person can be compelled to do something unthinkable (i.e. Sage), but also whether someone who has done unthinkable things ever truly make up for them by leading an exemplary life afterward (i.e. Josef).

In Sage's case, she is faced with a moral dilemma when Josef asks her to kill him. At first glance, it would seem an easy choice because she is not the kind of person who would condone such an act. However, the choice becomes more complicated when she learns what Josef claims to have done, along with learning the extent of her grandmother's suffering at the hands of the Nazis in general and Josef/Reiner in particular. Her choice is made still more complex by her religious beliefs -- or lack thereof -- and the influence of both former nun and best friend Mary and crusading, practicing Jew Leo. The final, and perhaps biggest, moral question for Sage appears at the narrative's conclusion when she must question the choice she made to kill him after learning that Josef was not, in fact, who he claimed to be. In developing this aspect of the theme, the novel seems to be asking whether anyone ever justified in taking the life of another. Further: what is the moral difference, the novel asks, between the single death Sage eventually causes, as the result of not knowing the individual human truth of the man she kills, and the multiple deaths that Franz caused, albeit perhaps indirectly, not recognizing the individual human truths of the thousands of Nazis he participated in slaughtering?

In terms of Josef/Franz/Reiner, when Josef is portraying himself as Reiner, he describes his journey to becoming a Nazi as somewhat of a natural progression, moving from being a member of Hitler's youth movement to being a member of the SS and taking part in the terrorizing of Jewish people, the destruction of their property, and eventually the mass executions of hundreds of internment camp prisoners. In other words, the question of moral choice doesn't seem to enter into his thoughts. Even though he reports drinking heavily to erase the images of the people whose lives he destroyed, he seems to express little or no actual remorse about it. Later in the narrative, Reiner he clearly does not hesitate to kill Darija in cold blood and would have done the same to Minka if Franz had not interrupted. Franz, on the other hand, as portrayed by Josef/"Reiner", was not cut out for the brutality of the Nazis but was dragged into the movement anyway. His moral perspective on the situation was, at best, ambivalent: he continued to protect his one Jewish friend until his brother learned about it and took matters into his own hands, and he took steps to protect Minka, although it could be argued that it was in his self interest since he was fascinated by her story. Franz's moral choices come up again in his relationship with Sage, a circumstance in which several questions triggering exploration / consideration of this theme emerge. Do Franz's good



works over the past half century (i.e. post war) make up for his earlier crimes? Is it moral to ask another human being to kill him, particularly since he has lied to her about his true identity? And finally, and perhaps most importantly to the plot, if he truly believes (as both his brother and his fellow Nazis did) that one Jew is the same as another, is it not only acceptable but appropriate to get forgiveness from Sage even though he has not wronged her personally?

Finally, it's important to remember that in the recounting of his World War II experiences, Josef is pretending to be Reiner but is in fact Franz. In other words, he is engaged in intense questioning of himself, his brother, and of the circumstances that led to the moral choices of both, another way in which this theme manifests / plays out.

## Guilt and Forgiveness

The concepts of guilt (who has it, why, and whether it's justified) and forgiveness (who needs it, who deserves it, and who can grant it) are woven throughout *The Storyteller*. The former is introduced early on when Sage, in narration, reveals that she attends the grief group for punishment rather than therapy, implying that she feels responsible (i.e. guilty) over her mother's death. The reader is not told why she feels that way until much later when she reveals that even though no one overtly blamed her for the accident, shortly before her death her mother said she forgave her. For both Sage and the reader, this strongly implies/suggests that Sage IS to blame – i.e. that she has something to be guilty ABOUT. One of the underlying thematic explorations of the narrative, then, has to do with whether Sage (whose name, on a metaphoric level, evokes wisdom) can let go of her self-inflicted guilt and move into self-bestowed forgiveness.

But the primary exploration of this theme comes through the plot-lines involving the Nazis and their victims, specifically prison camp soldier Josef and Minka, a survivor of the camp where Josef served. In his quest for self-forgiveness, and in response to overwhelming guilt, Josef wants Sage to help him die, but beforehand he also wants her to forgive him for his war crimes. He thinks that as a Jew, she has the power to do this despite the fact that she personally was not a victim of Josef or any other Nazi. She struggles with the idea, especially after hearing the story of suffering and survival told by Minka (her grandmother) and learning that she (Minka) herself struggled with the idea of forgiving those who killed her family. An opposite perspective is taken and proposed by Sage's friend Mary, a former nun, who tells Sage that the Catholic church's stance on forgiveness had a major positive / healing impact on her life and influenced her decision to join a religious order. Mary's statement that forgiving isn't something you do for someone else, but rather for yourself in order to let go, is a powerful part of the book, suggesting that although Sage tells the dying Josef that she will never forgive him, she actually did so in her own heart but refused to give him the satisfaction of knowing that. The question, then, becomes whether in that with-holding, which arguably caused Josef a degree of suffering, Sage actually DID forgive him.



## The Power of Stories

The Power of Stories is one of The Storyteller's central themes, playing out on several levels. This is primarily the result of the book's unusual structure - specifically, its being made up of two separate but related pieces of fiction. The first is the narrative involving present day characters (primarily Sage, Josef, and Leo), while the second is the story Minka wrote during the war that involves created characters (primarily Ania, Aleksander, Casimir, and Damian).

Within these two structural lines there are, in fact, four primary stories. The first is Sage's, the story of her gradual emergence from self-perpetuating guilt and reclusiveness into self-forgiveness and freedom, itself a story of significant emotional power. The second unfolds within that story, the tale of Ania, Aleks and Casimir that Minka began writing as a young girl and picked up again while a prisoner at Auschwitz. Even during Minka's happier childhood days, the tale was a dark one, very unlike the typical fairy tale one might expect a young girl to write. When she picks up the story again at the camp, it first becomes a way to entertain her fellow prisoners, who find that it gives them something to look forward to in their bleak lives, the first manifestation of this particular story's power. Later it literally saves Minka's life when Franz becomes fascinated with it and provides protection for her in exchange for continuing to write it and share it with him, the second manifestation of its power. The third, and perhaps the most poignant, manifestation of that power appears when Sage finds the original version of the story written on the back of photos that, she realizes, Franz has kept it for half a century, and even written various endings for in an attempt to determine how the would/could/should end.

Meanwhile, the third primary story in the book also unfolds within the context of the primary Sage story. The elderly man she befriends, Josef, tells the story of his life as a boy and his eventual life as an SS officer. This story takes on a darker tone than the others, exploring and defined by experiences of darkness and what might in fact be described as evil, shot through with sudden, startling rays of compassion. What Sage does not know at the time she's hearing this story, however, is that Josef is actually telling the story of his brother Reiner, which is considerably darker than his own history. It is never clear why Josef takes on Reiner's identity, but one possibility is that he thinks Sage is more likely to help him die if she thinks he is guilty of the heinous crimes his brother committed. He might have been correct because his story disgusts her to the extent that she works to get him prosecuted, asks her grandmother to talk about events she has refused to discuss previously, and in the end grants his wish by poisoning him. In other words, the story is powerfully dark, in contrast to the other stories in the book which, while difficult, are also powerfully redemptive and healing.

The fourth story is Minka's - specifically, her story of being kept in and/or surviving a Nazi concentration camp. She only agrees to tell the story when Sage and Leo need her help to build a case against Josef, her story powerfully pushes Leo towards even more passion about his work prosecuting Nazis. More importantly, it enables Sage to come to a better understanding and deeper appreciation for not only her own family but the

Jewish faith and heritage she has eschewed in the past, propelling her, albeit indirectly, to an affirming understanding of self-forgiveness.



# Styles

## Point of View

The Storyteller is told from several points of view. Rather than being separated into standard chapters, the novel is divided into sections according to who is telling which story at which point. The primary narrator is Sage Singer, whose actions and experiences put the plot in motion and is the common thread that binds the other characters together. Some sections are told from Josef's perspective, providing insights into his experiences and those of his brother as they became, and advanced as, Nazi officers. A few sections are told from Leo's perspective, as he discovers both his feelings for Sage and the truths associated with both Minka and Josef. Finally, a large part of the book comes from the point of view of Minka, as she painstakingly recounts the details of her youth and later experiences at the hands of the Nazis.

Using multiple narrators provides many benefits for the reader. Perhaps most importantly, the technique enables the reader to get the perspectives of the various characters directly from them rather than from a third-party narrator or from just one character. For example, the narration from Sage's point of view is intimately able to convey her private thoughts regarding her guilt following her mother's death, her moral dilemma about helping Josef die, her complex feelings about her Jewish heritage, her feelings for Adam and Leo, and her grandmother's experiences at the hands of the Nazis. From Leo, the reader learns about his background, his growing feelings for Sage, and background about the complex legalities of prosecuting former Nazis. From Josef comes an explanation regarding how young men in Germany easily became embroiled in the Nazi movement and a description of Auschwitz from the perspective of an officer there. Minka provides a grisly description of the lives of the prisoners as well as the gradual slipping away of her former life.

One thing the author does not provide is a glimpse into the private thoughts and motivations of the elderly Josef. All the chapters from his perspective consist of descriptions of his childhood, advancement within the Nazi regime, and experiences during the war. They are essentially transcripts of his conversations with Sage, so the reader is left to speculate about his private feelings about what he has done as well as his motivations for posing as his brother and asking Sage to kill him.

Finally, it's important to note that these shifts between point of view have thematic resonance as well as narrative impact. Specifically, they reinforce the novel's thematic contention that no one incident, and/or interpretation of that incident, can emerge from an entirely, exclusively black and white perspective but rather, even when dealing with an event as dark as the Holocaust, there are still shades of gray - in other words, other ways of perceiving the same incident/circumstances that aren't perhaps so clear cut.

## Language and Meaning

The language used in *The Storyteller* is standard American English and is straightforward and clear. There are variations in tone that differentiate the personalities of each of the main characters in the sections told from their perspective. For example, Leo displays a quick wit while Josef and Minka speak in a more formal way that is appropriate for their European upbringing and the fact that English is not their first language.

The sections narrated by Minka and Josef also contain a number of German words and phrases. Many are translated, but some are not. However, understanding their meaning is not necessary to follow the book's plot.

## Structure

*The Storyteller* has a somewhat unusual structure in several respects. Most notably, the book actually consists of two pieces of fiction -- the main plot involving Sage, Josef and Minka and the story written by Minka involving Ania and Aleks.

The primary plot is not divided into standard chapters, but rather into sections of various length denoted by which character is narrating that particular part. Those sections are not numbered, but are set apart by the name of the narrator -- Sage, Josef, Minka or Leo -- and by using a separate typeface for each of them. Sections of the parallel story are scattered sporadically throughout the book. They are not titled but are set in italics.



## Quotes

Of course, I know why -- three years after my mom's death -- it still feels like a sword has been run through my ribs every time I think of her. It's the same reason I am the only person from my original grief group still here. While most people come for therapy, I came for punishment.

-- Sage

**Importance:** This establishes, without explanation yet, that Sage feels responsible for her mother's death.

It turns out that sharing the past with someone is different from reliving it when you're alone. It feels less like a wound, more like a poultice.

-- Sage

**Importance:** This sets up and foreshadows the stories Josef and Minka will share regarding the horrors of their pasts.

Maybe Josef had actually begun to believe he was the person everyone thought him to be. And maybe that was what finally made him tell the truth.

-- Sage

**Importance:** The reasons for Josef's confessions about his Nazi past are never fully revealed, but this is one of the initial explanations Sage considers.

Inside each of us is a monster; inside each of us is a saint. The real question is which one we nurture the most, which one will smite the other.

-- Josef

**Importance:** This statement sets up one of the book's primary questions about whether people are inherently either good or evil or whether they make a choice. The fact that it comes from Josef, who has elements of both in him and is conflicted by that situation, is both poignant and deeply ironic.

I did not think about what I was doing. How could I? To be stripped naked, shouted at to move faster and faster toward the pit with your children running beside you. To look down and see your friends and your relatives, dying an instant before you. To take your place between the twitching limbs of the wounded, and wait for your moment. To feel the blast of the bullet, and then the heaviness of a stranger falling on top of you. To think like this was to think that we were killing other humans, and to us, they could not be humans. Because then what did that say about us?

-- Josef

**Importance:** This paragraph provides a graphic description of the work Reiner did for the SS and provides a glimpse into his thought process, implying that he did, in fact, know that what he was doing was wrong. However, in light of the fact that the narrator



was actually Franz posing as Reiner, that glimpse likely reveals more about Franz than about his brother.

For a while, people disappeared from the ghetto like fingerprints on a pane of glass -- ghosting into vision one moment, and the next, gone as if they'd never been there. Death walked next to me as I trudged down the street, whispered into my ear as I washed my face, embraced me as I shivered in bed. Herr Fassbinder was no longer my boss; instead of working in an office, I was reassigned to a factory that made leather boots. My hands shook even when I wasn't sewing; that's how hard it was to force the needle through the tough hide. We lived expecting to be deported at any minute. Some ladies in the factory had the diamonds from their wedding rings implanted as fillings by the dentist. Others smuggled small pouches of coins in their vaginas, and came to work this way, in case the roundups happened there. And still, we went on living. We worked and we ate and we celebrated birthdays and gossiped and read and wrote and prayed and we woke up each morning to do it all over again.

-- Minka

**Importance:** This is Minka's poetic way of describing the atmosphere in the Polish ghetto in 1944 as the Nazi occupation wore on, most notably mentioning that in many ways, day to day life went on as usual despite the fact that the world was crumbling around them. The contrast between life on the surface and the desperate attempts at eventual self-preservation is particularly vivid.

It was summertime, but we were wearing our heavy coats. This is how you knew that even then, even in spite of the rumors we had heard, we were still hopeful. Or stupid. Because we continued to imagine a future.

-- Minka

**Importance:** This passage, which comes as Minka describes how she and her father were loaded up and taken to the concentration camp, provides insight into the mindset of those being taken prisoner.

But not all Jews were victims -- look at Chairman Rumkowski, who sat safe with his new wife in his cushy home making lists, with the blood of my family on his hands. And not all Germans were murderers. Look at Herr Fassbinder, who had saved so many children on the night that children were taken away.

-- Minka

**Importance:** This establishes and defines Minka's thought process as she was on her way to Auschwitz, an attitude that would later change as she began to lump all Germans together, making her, by her own admission, no better than they were. Its appearance foreshadows the emergence, later in the narrative, of shades of grey in Sage's black-and-white thinking about the Nazis and their actions.

When he did, I grabbed the bread from the mud and tried to press it against my dress, to get rid of the worst of the filth. I could not see the officer's face anymore, but I knew who it was. As he walked away from me, his right hand was still twitching.



-- Minka

**Importance:** This establishes the initial connection between Minka and Reiner Hartmann, a connection that, over the course of the narrative, turns out to be one of the story's defining, central relationships.

I began to feel a great responsibility, as if my mind was a vessel, and I had the duty of keeping a record of those who were gone. We had ample opportunity to steal clothing, but the first thing I stole from Kanada was not a scarf or a pair of warm socks. It was someone else's memories.

-- Minka

**Importance:** This establishes both the moment of and the value of Minka taking the photographs left behind in prisoners' possessions, first to keep their memory alive and later to use as precious paper for her story.

Sometimes all you need to live one more day is a good reason to stick around.

**Importance:** This defines an important aspect of the book's thematic emphasis on the importance of stories, as Minka explains why she doled out her story to her fellow prisoners, teasing them with cliffhangers - to give them a reason to stay alive.

I do not know when I started thinking of the mass extermination at this camp as being humane -- thinking like the Germans, I supposed -- but if the alternative was to waste away to a corpse, as my mind shut down by degrees due to starvation, well, then, maybe it was best to just get this over with.

-- Minka

**Importance:** These were Minka's thoughts in the moment that she believed Reiner was about to beat her to death, demonstrating how far her spirit had fallen since wearing her winter coat to the camp even though it was summer, assuming she would still be around when cold weather came.

I had not thought about this, but it was true. There was no black and white. Someone who had been good her entire life could, in fact, do something evil. Ania was just as capable of committing murder, under the right circumstances, as any monster.

-- Minka

**Importance:** This foreshadows and parallels Sage's dilemma about whether to grant Josef's wish that she kill him.

It turns out that the more you repeat the same action, no matter how reprehensible, the more you can make an excuse for it in your own mind.

-- Aleksander

**Importance:** In this quote from the parallel story of Ania, Aleks echoes the same



sentiments expressed by Josef when speaking of the ease with which he learned to carry out the mass exterminations of Jews.

I realized that the guard who had untied my wrists had not been having trouble with the knots. He had slipped this into my mitten. It was a strip of watermarked paper, the same kind I had rolled into my typewriter every day for the past few months. 'WHAT HAPPENS NEXT,' it read.

-- Minka

**Importance:** This quote demonstrates the continuing importance of the Ania story to Franz, and foreshadows his asking the same question of Sage just before he dies.

I realize that I am still holding Josef's hand. Around his wrist is the hospital bracelet that he never removed. Josef Weber, DOB 4/20/18, B+

-- Sage

**Importance:** This marks the moment when Sage realizes that Josef is not Reiner Hartmann after all - specifically, the moment that she realizes that the blood type identified on the hospital wristband is not the same as Reiner's.