

Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo Study Guide

**Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo by Zlata
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Contents

Zlata's Diary: A Child's Life in Sarajevo Study Guide.....	1
Contents.....	2
Plot Summary.....	3
Pages 1 - 20.....	5
Pages 21 - 40.....	6
Pages 41 - 60.....	8
Pages 61 - 80.....	9
Pages 81 - 100.....	10
Pages 101 - 120.....	11
Pages 121 - 140.....	12
Pages 141 - 160.....	13
Pages 161 - 180.....	14
Pages 181 - 200.....	15
Characters.....	16
Objects/Places.....	19
Themes.....	21
Style.....	23
Quotes.....	25
Topics for Discussion.....	27



Plot Summary

Zlata's Diary is a collection of reprinted entries from the journal of Zlata Filipovic, a child who wrote during the Bosnian War from 1991 to 1993. They offer an innocent child's first-hand perspective on the horrors of war.

Initial entries (before war) present a normal pre-teen girl who enjoys hanging out with her friends, taking piano lessons, vacationing, and doing well in school.

The first hint of war comes when Zlata's father is recruited into the police reserves, and violence breaks out in the nearby region of Dubrovnik. The family worries about a family friend, Srdjan, living in that region. Zlata does not understand the reasons for this conflict, but is confident that war coming to her own country of Bosnia-Herzegovina would be "impossible."

But in March 1992, violence indeed breaks out in her city of Sarajevo as Serbian nationalists attack. Gunfire from the hills and shelling will be a near-constant reality from this point forward. Zlata's family must often hide in a neighbor's cellar to be protected from the shrapnel and bullets. The nationalists conquer one part of the town, and many are killed and wounded.

On May 2, the local post office is torched and the president of the country is kidnapped in the worst day of fighting yet. Many flee, including most of Zlata's friends. Zlata's uncle Braco is hurt in an accident and must spend several months in bed. Water and electricity go in and out, and food becomes harder to come by. The family must usually cook with an old wood-burning stove. The United Nations gets involved during this period, and the family comes to rely on care packages for food and other essentials.

The community copes as best it can. Birthdays are celebrated with large gatherings and whatever food can be found, and a temporary summer school is established which Zlata attends. It is through a friend and her summer school teacher, Irena, that Zlata gets the opportunity to have her diary entries published by the humanitarian organization UNICEF.

Through her work, Zlata's mother has a chance to escape the country with Zlata, but bureaucracy spoils the opportunity. Meanwhile, many of Zlata's friends or friends of the family, including a young man named Nedo that Zlata grows very fond of, escape on various convoys. Fortunately, Zlata is able to spend a lot of time with one of her best friends, Mirna.

On July 17, 1993, Zlata attends a promotion for the book made from her diary. She becomes an international celebrity, and thereafter is continually interviewed by journalists from around the world.



In mid-September 1993, there is some talk of a conditional peace accord, but by mid-October gunfire is still erupting from the hills surrounding the city. Zlata's last entry asks a simple question of the war: why?



Pages 1 - 20

Pages 1 - 20 Summary and Analysis

Zlata speaks of her excitement of returning to school and seeing the friends she has not seen since last school term. Zlata returns to school, and all her friends share stories about the places they have been in the summer. Zlata continues to take piano and tennis lessons. She is enjoying shop class. She attends the birthday party of a schoolmate, Ivana Varunek, and enjoys the experience greatly.

Her family spends a weekend at their farm house in a region called Crnotina. The autumn leaves are changing, and Zlata expresses joy of experiencing the beauty of nature.

Zlata's father is called into the police reserves, and the entire family is worried and panicked. Father will have to serve in the police every third day. There is some political unrest that Zlata does not understand. Nevertheless, she feels the chance of war coming to her own country of Bosnia-Herzegovina to be "impossible."

War breaks out in a town called Dubrovnik. The adults of the town spend their days watching the news and worriedly talking politics. Zlata, meanwhile, has piano and voice recitals. She is excited about skiing in a region called Jahorina, and she has a sleep-over with a couple of friends. Zlata's father is released from the reserves.

Zlata celebrates her eleventh birthday, but the celebration is spoiled because she has a bad sinus infection. Meanwhile, war continues in Dubrovnik. The family is especially worried about a family friend, Srdjan. Zlata's mother has a conversation with him, and Srdjan reveals he has gone without good food, electricity, and water for days.

After a visit to the doctor, Zlata receives antibiotics and gets well enough to have a proper birthday celebration with her friends, complete with games and a cake. Zlata and the family prepare a care package for war-torn Dubrovnik, full of sweets, vitamins, books, and more.

Christmas arrives. Zlata has managed an A average at school. The family has a big Christmas with a traditional tree, decorations, and presents. The holiday cheer is contrasted with continuing bad news from Dubrovnik when Srdjan calls.



Pages 21 - 40

Pages 21 - 40 Summary and Analysis

Zlata spends the holiday break enjoying American popular culture (MTV, New Kids on the Block, watching *The Witches of Eastwick* and *Top Gun* movies). She is bored. Going to Jahorina for skiing and playing in the snow helps to brighten her mood. Zlata apologizes for not writing more often in her diary.

Zlata again comes down with a bad cold, and so do her mother and father. She gets treated with antibiotics again, and recovers. School starts up again in early February. Her parents are still fighting lingering effects from the flu.

In early March (in 1992), Zlata reports that violence has erupted in Sarajevo. Barricades have been set up all over town. Zlata gets much of her news from an independent radio station. There are reports that 3,000 Chetniks (Serbian nationalists) are marching to attack Sarajevo. On the national "YUTEL TV" station, Bosnian Serb leader Radovan Karadzic argues with Alija Izetbegovic, the president of Bosnia-Herzegovina. The politicians apparently come to a peace agreement on March 4, and the barricades are removed. By March 6, Zlata reports that things are back to normal.

However, violence continues to erupt in other parts of the region. Zlata's parents try to limit Zlata's access to the news and radio, but they cannot fully shield her from the horrible images of war. A UN peace force arrives in Sarajevo, and Zlata's father expresses hope that their presence will bring peace.

Zlata decides on a name for her diary: Mimmy. She now starts each entry with "Dear Mimmy."

There is a rumor that Sarajevo will be bombed on April 4. This rumor causes widespread panic, and the train and bus stations become pandemonium as everyone tries to leave Sarajevo. April 4 comes and goes with no bombing. However, gunfire erupts in town. A medical student is killed in front of the Bosnia-Herzegovina parliament building, and nationalists have occupied and destroyed the older part of town called the Bascarsija. Zlata is very scared and her family is at a loss for what to do. Explosions join gunfire as a daily reality. Schools close.

Newer sections of towns get destroyed by gunfire and shelling. Zlata's neighborhood, in the middle of town, remains relatively peaceful. Zlata's mother is on the phone constantly, talking to friends and family. Most of Zlata's friends flee to various parts of the world. Zlata's parents have constant late-night talks about what to do, whether to stay together or separate. Zlata considers leaving Sarajevo, but decides she would never do so without her mom and dad.

Shelling gets especially intense, and the family retreats into the cellar for protection. Their cellar is inadequately defended, so during the next attack the family uses a

neighbor's cellar. The streets are not safe. Electricity goes out, and food becomes harder to come by.



Pages 41 - 60

Pages 41 - 60 Summary and Analysis

On Saturday, May 2, 1992, Zlata writes about the worst day yet. Heavy shelling forces the family into the basement. Zlata's father learns that the president has been kidnapped and that the local post office was set on fire. Later, Zlata watches the flames devour the post office.

The next day, Zlata's father goes to check on Zlata's grandparents, who thankfully are okay. Touring the town, Zlata sees the devastation of busted buildings and cars.

The family rearranges the furniture in the home, because both bedrooms have windows that face the hills where the majority of gunfire comes from. So now the family sleeps in the same room on mattresses on the floor. Zlata learns of some people who were wounded, including a neighbor named Jaca. A schoolgirl Zlata's own age, Nina, died after shrapnel lodged in her brain.

Another night of fighting prompts the family to seek shelter in their neighbor's cellar. Phones are not working, and the TV continues to show horrible scenes of violence. The part of town where Zlata's mother used to work has erupted in flames. Zlata can't bear to watch TV any longer. There is an announcement that school is indefinitely suspended.

The family learns that Zlata's uncle, Braco, was badly wounded in his leg to the point where the leg was nearly amputated. As it stands, after a long operation the leg was saved, but Braco will be bedridden with a cast and rods on his leg for a long time.

Zetra Hall, built for the Olympics, is badly shelled and nearly completely destroyed. The family bears a big scare when fighting breaks out on Vaso Miskin Street, at a time when Zlata's mother was nearby. Zlata and her father nervously await news of the dead and wounded, and are elated when Zlata's mother reappears safe and sound.

A new friend, Maja, turns eighteen, and the celebration is bittersweet because of the omnipresence of war. There has been no electricity for a while, leading to fears that food will start to spoil. Zlata's father discovers an old wood-burning stove in the attic, and they bring it out to cook the old-fashioned way. Soon the whole neighborhood is using the stove to cook food before it spoils.

A nearby jewelry shop is shelled, and the force of it breaks nearly all the windows of Zlata's house.



Pages 61 - 80

Pages 61 - 80 Summary and Analysis

Next, more bad news: the family's country home in Crnotina has burned down, and several of their neighbors there have been killed. Violence continues, and there is a massacre on Tito street. Zlata states that she is a child without a childhood. Water and electricity continue to come and go. Most of Zlata's friends have left by now. Perhaps Zlata's best friend during this time is Bojana, a neighbor's daughter.

On July 8th the family receives a UN care package, with beef, fish, cheese, soap, and other essentials. There are long lines to receive one of these packages. A neighbor and friend, Nedo, finds a kitten, and Zlata names it Cici. Two refugee girls, Emina and Samra, move in to a nearby apartment. The neighborhood has become a sort of family through all the distress of the war.

Many animals roam the streets. Zlata hears from two friends who fled the country, Martina and Matea. They recently went to a Guns 'n' Roses concert in Budapest. Uncle Braco is feeling much better and is starting to walk around a bit after his terrible injury. Meanwhile, a makeshift school has developed in the community, and Zlata has signed up for a few classes.

The brother of Srdjan, the family friend, was gunned down in front of his house, and Zlata's mother is sick with grief. Later, word reaches the family that Great Uncle Halim has died. Though he was old, the death underscores how war has torn the extended family apart.

Emina and Samra's apartment is hit with a shell, though no one was inside. This causes great panic on the part of the neighborhood, who again take refuge in the neighbors' (the Bobar family) basement. In other news, Uncle Braco is well enough to begin work at a newspaper in the town of Otes in order to report on the war.

Zlata's father develops a hernia from all the carrying of gallons of water. He has also lost significant weight. Zlata's mother is forced to do the water-carrying.

Zlata begins to attend summer school and it helps take her mind off the war a little bit. Her teacher is named Irena Vidovic.



Pages 81 - 100

Pages 81 - 100 Summary and Analysis

September comes. There has been less gunfire and days are proceeding more peacefully. The community has been without electricity for a month. Finally, on September 8th, the electricity returns.

Emina and Samra take on a family member, a toddler girl named Nejra, whose home was shelled. Zlata thinks Nejra is very cute. Samra has found a job and works long hours every day.

A boy, Eldin, from Zlata's drama class at summer school, dies from shrapnel. Zlata celebrates the birthday of a neighbor friend, Alma, but the celebration is cut short by shelling.

Immediate shelling stops long enough for Zlata to cross a bridge into a hard-hit part of Sarajevo. She sees her old school has been destroyed along with many other buildings. She is finally able to visit her grandparents, who are elated to see her. Water and electricity go out again, forcing the family to use a car battery to power the radio for war news.

Autumn has arrived, and the days are getting colder and shorter, leaving everyone to worry about the lack of basic utilities for the cold winter.

A brief moment of joy comes when Zlata is able to reunite with her best friend, Mirna. This is followed by a moment of sadness when Zlata's mother's good friend, Neda, chooses to leave in order to seek out family members who have not been heard from since the outbreak of war.

The wood-burning stove is moved into the kitchen, where it provides much-needed warmth.

Teacher Irena and an older friend, Maja, ask about Zlata's diary, and Zlata learns that her diary is going to be published by UNICEF, as the organization was looking to publish a child's account of the war.

People have been expelled from a region of the city called Grbavica, which is now occupied by the nationalist forces.

Zlata's mother receives a grant offer (through her employer) to work and move herself and Zlata to Holland. Zlata's mother is torn between taking the offer to escape war and leaving her family behind. She decides that she must move for her daughter's sake. However, the request gets caught up in the bureaucracy and eventually is denied. On the other hand, Zlata's good friends Maja and Bojana are able to leave with a passing convoy. Zlata has a teary goodbye with her friends, but she must remain in Sarajevo.



Pages 101 - 120

Pages 101 - 120 Summary and Analysis

Many citizens leave Sarajevo with the same convoy that Maja and Bojana leave with, and Zlata is sad. Zlata's father cuts himself with the electric saw while chopping wood and must be sewn up at the hospital.

Zlata understands that some of the war is about Serbs versus Croats versus Muslims. She doesn't understand such divisions, and thinks that there are good and bad people in each group.

The family continues to hold out for another convoy to take them out of Sarajevo. Meanwhile, the community is taking electric saws to any trees left standing in the city for firewood, and the buzz of these saws fill the air. Zlata celebrates her twelfth birthday on December 3rd, and the community comes together to give her trinkets and enjoy some food.

The nearby town of Otes breaks out in violence. This is the town where Braco works, and everyone is worried for him. Zlata reports that the whole town is destroyed, though Braco manages to get out okay. However, Braco's best friend and co-worker, Miso, is hit by gunfire and is killed.

Despite it all, life continues on. Zlata and her best friend Mirna start to take piano lessons again. Zlata attends a Christmas pageant where presents are handed out, though she doesn't get one because she is too nice to try to elbow her way through the crowd.

Zlata is worried about her parents. War has made them older-looking and gaunt, and Zlata prays for peace to come. Though gunfire is now rare, lack of water and electricity and the food shortage are constant reminders that the war is still happening. The family has a small get-together to celebrate the 1993 New Year.

The cold of winter hits especially hard after the New Year. The family now practically lives in just the kitchen, as that's the only room they can heat (with the stove). Baths are taken in a basin with a jug of water. Zlata's father develops frostbite on his fingers from chopping wood in the cold, and the fingers swell badly.



Pages 121 - 140

Pages 121 - 140 Summary and Analysis

Zlata hears from her departed friends Maja and Bojana. They now live in a big house and go to school like regular kids. Zlata goes to a retired teacher's house for math lessons.

Electricity returns to the city, but only for "priority" customers. Zlata's family bootlegs (with permission) a neighbor's electricity to have a little of their own.

Life continues amidst war. The favorite event to celebrate is the birthday. Zlata participates in parties for toddler Nejra, Kenan, Zika, Haris, and Bojana (even though she is out of the country). Electricity turns back off—seemingly a never-ending cycle.

French filmmakers visit Zlata (presumably they had gotten their hands on her published diary), and wish to do an interview of her at the local university. Zlata is very excited. However, there is no electricity again and the cameraman could not make it into the country, so the interview is canceled.

Zlata writes about receiving care packages full of food and chocolates from various family friends outside of Sarajevo. She also receives (belated) New Year's cards from French children on behalf of a humanitarian organization.

The household finally gets gas power restored, meaning the wood-burning stove does not have to be used any longer, and no more chopping of firewood.

A mini-crisis is averted when friends provide some bird food for Zlata's bird Cicko. They had run out of food and the bird was barely eating anything. Spring comes, but Zlata sees only death and the destruction of war, rather than the life and rebirth normally associated with the season.

Family friend Nedo gets a job with the UN peacekeeping force.

Zlata starts school again. It's not like it was before the war, but it provides some measure of normalcy. Cicko, beloved pet bird, dies suddenly after seven years with the family. Zlata is greatly saddened.



Pages 141 - 160

Pages 141 - 160 Summary and Analysis

All of Zlata's clothes are becoming too short and tight, as she has grown much since the start of war. She gets permission to take some of her friend Martina's clothes, who departed the area long ago. Sad news comes when Zlata learns that a friend of a friend named Bobo was shot dead by a sniper. Zlata gets new neighbors, Haris and Alenka. The housewarming party is interrupted by shelling and gunfire. Zlata's family gives the name of "Jovo" to the sniper(s) who continually fires close to their home.

Zlata talks of a "Vance-Owen peace plan," something that proposes to divide up the country to ease ethnic tensions and stop the war, but Zlata expresses doubt about it, and states that the politicians are busy negotiating while not listening to the real people who are suffering.

Zlata next relates a lively fight with a mouse in the house, as family members scramble to shoo a mouse out the door.

Zlata relates frustration with the local market, where basic goods are sold at ridiculously high prices. The people she knows depend on care packages and homegrown vegetable gardens rather than these sky-high goods. Nedo leaves Sarajevo temporarily as part of his UN work. Nedo sees his girlfriend in a town called Split, and then returns to Sarajevo bearing gifts of food and trinkets for Zlata and others.

On May 31, 1993, electricity goes back off, and shelling starts back up again, about three or four explosions a minute until the wee hours of the night.

On June 13, Zlata receives five copies of her book—photocopies of her diary pages in book form. The cover has her face on it. Nedo announces he is going to leave Sarajevo for good, sick as he is of the war. Cici, the beloved pet cat, is seen less and less as she hangs out with tomcats in the neighborhood.

Nedo leaves on July 7. It's a teary farewell, and Zlata is very upset. The family spends some time remembering Nedo and telling stories about him.



Pages 161 - 180

Pages 161 - 180 Summary and Analysis

Nedo's departure reminds Zlata that nearly none of her pre-war friends are still around, and she feels lonely. She keeps in touch with letters, which she prizes greatly, but still she admits having her friends with her would be much better than mere letters.

On July 17, 1993, Zlata attends an official promotion for her diary book. A woman reads passages from her diary accompanied by piano. Many journalists as well as local citizens are there to support Zlata. At the end, Zlata reads a prepared statement she wrote about war robbing her of her childhood, and her hope for peace.

Afterwards, Zlata is something of an international celebrity, and journalists from several countries come to visit her at her home. ABC News makes her their "person of the week."

Cici the cat is pregnant, and Zlata wants to adopt at least one of the kittens.

Journalists from all corners of the world continue to interview Zlata. It takes her mind off things, but at night the shelling and gunfire remind her that there is a war on. Some journalists compare Zlata to Anne Frank, a comparison she dislikes considering Frank's unfortunate fate.

Basic utilities continue to be a daily struggle. Flour is very expensive and hard to come by, making bread a rarity. The wood-burning stove is still used in periods of no electricity, and water lugging is a daily reality for most. At night, Zlata must read and write by candlelight.

Zlata is devastated when Cici the cat dies. Cici did not survive her pregnancy for one reason or another. She is buried in the back yard next to Cicko the bird.

There is news that Nedo, now living in Austria, is getting married. Meanwhile, Zlata befriends several reporters who visit frequently. On August 18, 1993, there is news of a possible Geneva peace agreement. Zlata doesn't allow herself to hope that it will be successful, in order to avoid disappointment.

Nedo gets married on August 26. The family has a party for him even though he's in another country. Zlata states that this "imitation of life" helps them to cope with the reality of war.



Pages 181 - 200

Pages 181 - 200 Summary and Analysis

A family friend, affectionately called "Auntie" Radmila, leaves Sarajevo on a convoy, and the family is sad. A reporter friend, Alexandra, visits and shares news about the devastation in nearby Mostar. They visit the ruins of the Sarajevo library, called Vjecnica. Alexandra is returning to her own country.

On September 5th, letters stop coming into Sarajevo, which Zlata states is worse in some ways than not getting electricity or water. Zlata enjoys an orange for the first time in a long time.

On September 6th, Zlata starts seventh grade. She receives a letter from Nedo expressing his affection, which Zlata vows to memorize.

On September 17th, 1993, there is a rumor of a peace accord to be signed on September 21st. Zlata reports that the war has thus far claimed 15,000 dead and 50,000 maimed or wounded. She desperately wishes the madness will stop.

September 21st comes and goes with no true agreement in place. On September 28th, the Bosnia-Herzegovina parliament announces a "conditional" acceptance of peace terms, and Zlata pessimistically wonders what "conditional" means. Alexandra the reporter visits Zlata again. Zlata receives a pen pal letter from an American boy, Brandon, who lives in Pennsylvania, which makes her happy.

Gunfire again breaks out on October 14th, making Zlata fear for her grandparent's safety, who live on the other side of town. Zlata states that she has consented for her diary to be published worldwide, and she is content with the knowledge that those outside of Sarajevo will know the horrors of war.

Fierce gunfire and shelling again erupt on October 17th, forcing Zlata and her neighbors into the cellar for the first time in a long time. Zlata again asks why they are subject to such misery, and why the "lunatics in the hills" want to spread such chaos and unhappiness.



Characters

Zlata Filipovic

Zlata is a pre-teen girl living in Sarajevo at the time of the outbreak of the Bosnian war in 1992. When the book begins, Zlata is ten, and the book ends when she is twelve. She records her thoughts and daily happenings as the war progresses. Eventually the relevant entries of her diary are published by UNICEF during the war.

Zlata could be described as a perfectly normal child prior to the war. She has many friends from school, she takes piano and voice lessons, she enjoys listening to American pop songs (like Madonna) and reading. She lives with her mother and father, who love her deeply. She enjoys spending summer vacations at the family's vacation home in Crnotina, and during the winter the family leaves for a region called Jahorina to ski.

After the war, Zlata expresses the sort of fear, confusion, anger, and loneliness one might naturally expect from a child during war. She does not understand the politics behind the war well—and no adults will properly explain it in an attempt to shield her—but she sees the human cost of the war on a daily basis, and often wonders why the war is happening. She is pessimistic about the politicians of her country, who she calls "kids," and continually doubts any progress toward peace is being made.

Despite the war, Zlata has an irrepressible energy and a zest for life. She revels in birthday celebrations, and is greatly saddened when her friends move away to escape war. She tries her best to concentrate on living her life rather than losing herself in worry or fear. She cares deeply about her community and is greatly despaired at the destruction of her city.

Malik and Alica (Zlata's Father and Mother)

Malik and Alica are perhaps in their forties or early fifties, and are the parents to Zlata. They love Zlata and are chiefly concerned with her well-being and the family's continued survival. Alica has a job in another part of town, as a chemist. That part of Sarajevo gets largely destroyed and becomes so dangerous that Alica must abandon her job and stay home. Malik is a lawyer whose offices are close by, but soon after the outbreak of war he stops his job as well to concentrate on survival.

Zlata's parents try their best to shield Zlata from the worst aspects of the war, and they refuse to try to explain the politics behind the war (involving ethnic cleansing, etc.). They badly wish for Zlata to be able to remain a child and have a normal childhood.

When water supply is interrupted, Malik must carry heavy jugs of water several times a day to the family's apartment. He develops a hernia from all of this weight carrying, and is advised to cease the heavy lifting. It then falls on Alica to carry water for the family.



When winter comes and there is no electricity or gas for heating, Malik drags the ancient wood-burning stove from the attic. Many members of the community use this stove for cooking. Malik must frequently chop wood to feed the stove. Usually there is little in the way of trees, so Malik must chop up old furniture or whatever else is at hand. One time, Malik develops frostbite in his fingers from chopping in the cold and must be medically treated. Meanwhile, Alica does her best to cook for the family with the limited food supply.

Mirna

Mirna is Zlata's best friend. She leaves for some time at the beginning of the war, but returns soon after. Zlata and Mirna spend much time together and attend school and take piano lessons together.

Braco

Braco is Zlata's mother's brother. He has a bad accident, to the point his leg is nearly amputated but ultimately saved. He recovers in order to join a press corps to report on the Bosnian War.

Nedo

Nedo is a young man, a refugee, who becomes a dear family friend. He manages to leave the war and eventually gets married.

The Bobar family

The Bobars are Zlata's family's closest neighbors. Zlata's family uses the Bobars' cellar when shelling becomes especially intense. The family includes Maja and Bojana, young girls who become good friends of Zlata.

Auntie Radmila

Auntie Radmila is Zlata's mother's good friend from work. She has become such a good friend that the family affectionately calls her "Auntie." Like so many others, she eventually escapes Sarajevo.

Srdjan

Srdjan is a family friend who lives in nearby Dubrovnik. Dubrovnik is the first region to come under attack, and so Srdjan is the first friend who provides news on the violence of the Bosnian War.



Irena

Irena is Zlata's summer school teacher. With her help, Zlata's diary gets into the hands of people at UNICEF, who publish it.

Emina and Samra

Emina and Samra are young women who move into the apartment next to the Zlata family. They become good friends. They come to take care of a toddler named Nejra, whom Zlata adores. Their apartment is shelled and largely destroyed one night, though they are unhurt.



Objects/Places

Sarajevo

Sarajevo is the capital of Bosnia-Herzegovina, and the city in which Zlata and her family lives. In early March 1992, it gets attacked as part of the Bosnian War.

Crnotina

Crnotina is the location of Zlata's family's summer home. Zlata enjoys sunbathing and swimming there and is sad when the war prevents the family from traveling there. Eventually, their home in Crnotina is destroyed.

Jahorina

Jahorina is a popular ski resort destination that Zlata often travels to. Like the summer resort of Crnotina, Zlata is sad that she cannot travel to Jahorina once the war breaks out.

Dubrovnik

Dubrovnik is the first nearby region to get attacked. Zlata's family's friend Srdjan lives there, and they become worried about him once phone communication becomes difficult within Dubrovnik.

Mimmy

Mimmy is Zlata's affectionate name for her own diary. Later entries begin, "Dear Mimmy."

Cicko and Cici

Cicko is Zlata's bird and Cici is Zlata's cat. She loves them both. Unfortunately they both die during the course of the war. Cicko drops dead suddenly (Zlata figures the bird became sick of the war), and Cici becomes pregnant but is unable to sustain the pregnancy.

Wood-burning Stove

Once winter comes and electricity and gas become unavailable, the family needs a way to heat their room and cook, and so Zlata's father unearths the wood-burning stove from

the attic. The stove becomes popular for the entire neighborhood to come and cook what they can.

UNICEF

UNICEF is the large humanitarian organization that decides to publish Zlata's diary in order to share a first-hand account of the Bosnian War with the world.

The Dangerous Room

After outbreak of war, the family must rearrange their apartment so that they abandon the room with windows facing the hills. The hills are where the gunfire comes from. This abandoned room becomes known as the dangerous room.

Letters

Written letters are very important for Zlata to be able to continue to connect with friends who have already escaped Sarajevo. Eventually she even receives letters from other children in foreign countries as part of an international pen pal program. Zlata reprints a few letters in her diary.



Themes

Ordinary People, Extraordinary Circumstances

Despite its unfiltered images of the Bosnian War, the message of Zlata's Diary is ultimately uplifting. It shows the strength of the human spirit, and the never-say-die unbreakable will of a community. Zlata's friends and neighbors band together to provide the support they all need to get through war. One aspect of this support is practical. By pooling resources, combining food, sharing water and electricity, etc., the community does what it needs to in order to provide for its members. The Bobars freely share their well-fortified cellar with their neighbors, and another neighbor shares electricity with Zlata's family. On the other hand, Zlata's family shares their wood-burning stove with the neighborhood so that cooking is possible in times when electricity is out. This demonstrates the generosity in the citizens of Sarajevo.

The other aspect of the community is moral and emotional support. Those who remain in Sarajevo prop each other up, providing companionship or a friendly shoulder to cry on. Insistence on celebrating birthdays, or an event like Nedo's marriage, maintains a sense of cultural connectedness. Even in the case of the community members who have left, written letters provide a crucial connection and intimacy that Zlata in particular cherishes.

Finally, there is Zlata herself. She has moments of despair, but mostly she is vivacious, bubbly, and positive. She believes in the strength of her community to get through this difficult time.

Small Comforts

It is very important for Zlata (and by extension, her community) to maintain some semblance of normal life in the middle of war. Certain activities help to distract from the horrors of the war by focusing on the positive rather than the negative. For example, Zlata and her family frequently celebrate birthdays with whatever food they can muster. They may even celebrate the birthday of someone who has left the country entirely. Birthday celebrations provide a crucial form of societal connection for the fragmented community, and they provide an opportunity for merriment amidst tragedy.

There are many similar "distractions" in Zlata's life that calm her nerves, ground her, and distract from the war. She cares for her bird Cicko and her cat Cici (before they die). She receives a lot of correspondence in the form of letters. This allows her to connect with long-lost friends as well as to make new friends in the form of international pen pal programs set up by humanitarian organizations.

Perhaps the greatest and most obvious comfort Zlata develops is the very act of writing in her diary. By confessing her hopes and fears and reporting on events of the day, Zlata

has a crucial outlet for her emotions. Her negative emotions are released on paper, and not bottled up inside of her to fester and grow in an unhealthy manner.

Humanity and Politics as Viewed By a Child

Zlata has only a limited understanding of the politics behind the war she is suffering through. She knows that it involves tensions between the Serbs, Croats, and Muslims, but she cannot see the value of these ethnic/cultural distinctions. Zlata believes that most people, no matter their ethnic makeup, are good and "ordinary" people. "Ordinary" is an important concept to Zlata and one that she often returns to. She believes that elite politicians (whom she derides as "kids") who are out of touch with regular citizens are responsible for war, and also responsible for failing to arrange peace. Zlata believes that if the "ordinary" people had a voice in the overarching politics and if the wishes of ordinary people were respected, the war would end. Zlata sees first-hand the devastation the war is inflicting on people like her, people who just want to enjoy life and exist as part of a harmonious and peaceful community.

Zlata's "childish" point of view is refreshing. She argues that the leaders of the various factions involved have no idea what effect their political and military machinations are having on the people they supposedly speak for. At the heart of Zlata's outlook is the belief that there is a great disconnect between the government of Bosnia-Herzegovina and its people, for only the gravest of miscommunications could lead to such violence and bloodshed.



Style

Perspective

Zlata's Diary is valuable insofar that it provides a child's perspective on war and the Bosnian War in particular. Zlata is a normal girl growing up in Sarajevo. She enjoys school and worries about grades, she likes American pop acts like Madonna and New Kids on the Block, she takes piano lessons, and she enjoys the company of her friends. As a child, she does not have the larger geopolitical perspective on what's causing the war or which factions are involved. To some, this "lack" of perspective could actually be perceived as a strength. Zlata argues that people should not be divided along ethnic lines (ethnic tensions being a particular issue in the Bosnian War) and that violence in the name of ethnic divisions makes no sense. Ultimately, who could want to contradict this "childish" logic?

In addition to coming from the eyes of a child, Zlata's Diary is also special because it is a first-hand account of the Bosnian War. Especially underscored are the daily realities shared by many citizens in war-torn Sarajevo: lack of the basics like water, electricity, gas; constant fear of the next outbreak of shelling or a sniper attack; the many sacrifices that had to be made, as with food. Zlata's "in the moment" account allows the reader to appreciate at some level the visceral frustrations and fears that so gripped the citizens of Bosnia-Herzegovina at that time in history.

Tone

Some of the interest in reading Zlata's Diary is appreciating the degree to which tone can differ, entry to entry, and even within entries. The first handful of the included diary entries are pre-war, and these entries demonstrate an upbeat, optimistic, happy child who is enjoying her life, family, and friends. Once war starts, understandably Zlata has good days and bad days, attitude-wise, and this is reflected in the tone of her writing. One day she can have a happy birthday celebration, or have a day of fun with best friend Mirna; the next day, Zlata finds herself running for the cellar to protect herself from gunfire and intense shelling.

Usually, Zlata is able to take her situation in stride, and maintain a sunny disposition. However, pessimism can bubble up, and in these vulnerable moments, Zlata can express anger, dismay, annoyance, boredom, sadness, or even despair. If she is angry, she might write in all capital letters, or use many exclamation points. To express despair or sadness, she might keep an entry unusually short and state that she is too sad to write any more. Zlata also uses repetition ("Horrible! Slaughter! Massacre!") to underscore her frustration with the war and her sense that the violence is never-ending.



In general, attention to tone provides the reader with an appreciation for the extreme emotional up and downs Zlata experienced in such an intense situation. Moments of great happiness can easily give way to times of intense sadness or hopelessness.

Structure

Zlata's Diary is a book containing the diary entries of Zlata Filipovic. The first entry is dated Monday, September 2, 1991, and the last entry is dated Sunday, October 17, 1993. There are many dozens of entries. Entries vary in length, from the very brief, one hundred words or less, to perhaps four hundred words or more. Zlata eventually nicknames her diary "Mimmy," and so later entries always start with "Dear Mimmy."

As these are the real-life diary entries of Zlata, written on a day-to-day basis, there is necessarily a disconnected quality to the book taken as a whole. Zlata skips to many different subjects—school, friends, condition of the city during war, her mother and father—and on any one day she might relate a noteworthy event that just happened, or an update on a continuing story (such as Uncle Braco's recovery from a bad leg injury).

Early pre-war entries establish Zlata before the war as a carefree, typical teenage girl, interested in friends, school grades, and enjoying pop culture (specifically American pop culture). Soon, violence erupts in Sarajevo, and Zlata becomes somewhat of a journalist, reporting on events and trying to make sense of the chaotic situation.

Zlata writes at both the geopolitical level—sharing thoughts about the peace talks at Geneva or the political infighting between Serbs, Croats, and Muslims—and also the personal level, describing hunger for a particular food she hasn't enjoyed in a while, or expressing loneliness when another friend escapes Sarajevo.



Quotes

"Somehow I don't notice and don't feel the beauty of nature when I'm in town the way I do when I'm in Crnotina. In Crnotina it smells good, it caresses me, it calls me into its embrace."

p. 5

"What on earth is happening and why? God, is it possible that there's a war going on down there? Dubrovnik is being destroyed, people are dying. Sad but true."

p. 14

"Terrible reports and pictures are coming in from all over. Mommy and Daddy won't let me watch TV when the news is on, but you can't hide all the bad things that are happening from us children."

pp. 28-29

"I keep thinking about the [peace] march I joined today. It's bigger and stronger than war. That's why it will win. The people must be the ones to win, not the war, because war has nothing to do with humanity. War is something inhuman."

p. 35

"Is it possible I'll never see Nina again? Nina, an innocent eleven-year-old little girl—the victim of a stupid war. I feel sad. I cry and wonder why? She didn't do anything."

p. 45

"All I can see through the broken windows is the park in front of my house. Empty, deserted, no children, no joy. I hear the sound of shells, and everything around me smells of war. War is now my life."

p. 68

"The 'kids' [politicians] are negotiating. Will they finally negotiate something? Are they thinking about us when they negotiate, or are they just trying to outwit each other, and leave us to our fate?"

p. 91

"Why is politics making us unhappy, separating us, when we ourselves know who is good and who isn't? We mix with the good, not with the bad. And among the good there are Serbs and Croats and Muslims, just as there are among the bad. I simply don't understand it."

p. 103

"It's as if Sarajevo is slowly dying, disappearing. Life is disappearing. So how can I feel spring, when spring is something that awakens life, and here there is no life, here everything seems to have died."

pp. 132-33



"I'm losing it. I WANT TO SCREAM, BANG MY FISTS, KILL! I'm human too, you know, I can only take so much. Ooohhh! I'm so sick of it all."

p. 154

"[I]n their letters they send me their love, their thoughts, pictures of a normal life, songs, fashion, best wishes for happiness and an end to this madness. I read them and sometimes I cry, because I want them, I want life, not just letters."

p. 163

"People worry about us, they think about us, but sub-humans want to destroy us. Why? I keep asking myself why? We haven't done anything. We're innocent. But helpless!"

p. 200



Topics for Discussion

Why are letters so important to Zlata? How do they function in her war-torn world?

How do Zlata's living conditions change when war begins? What must she do without?

What does Zlata know about the politics behind the war? What is her opinion of the politicians trying to arrange for peace?

Why does Zlata's family have to rearrange their furniture and sleep in different rooms when war breaks out?

What is Zlata's hope about the book that will be published of her diary? What does she hope the book accomplishes?

How does the family cook meals when the electricity and gas go out?

Name a few items, people, or events that Zlata takes comfort in amidst war.