

**LIKE
A RIVER
FROM
ITS
COURSE**

READER'S GUIDE

Author's Notes and
Discussion Starters

THE BEGINNING

In 1939, the Soviet Union and Germany entered into a nonaggression pact in which they signed a treaty agreeing not to engage one another in war. *Like a River from Its Course* opens with the attack of Kiev on June 22, 1941, when Hitler violated the terms of their agreement and launched his calculated and aggressive blitzkrieg across the nation. Most Soviet citizens were entirely unprepared for the attack. Propaganda videos promoted the idea that they were to remain tenuously safe from the spreading war, so the attack in the early hours of June 22 came as a surprise.

Describe the emotions that Maria felt during those first hours after the attack. What early glimpses do you see of Maria's tenacity that let you know how she will handle and face the challenges to come?

How did Ivan respond to that initial attack? What emotions did he experience throughout the evening as he watched his nearly grown son wrestle with what he knew was to be his duty?

How do you think Ivan's upbringing influenced him as a father? Do you think his years working the collective farms and the verbal abuse he suffered from his father affected his decision to give so quickly and willingly to Josef Michaelovich and his family?

What risk did Josef Michaelovich take when he revealed his family's Jewish identity to Ivan? Why do you think he trusted Ivan enough to share that information with him without knowing him previously?

What were your initial impressions of Frederick in the first part of the book? Did you feel sympathy toward him, or a sense of loathing at his part in the attack on the Soviet Union? How did his upbringing affect his actions?

Roughly 34,000 Jewish men, women, and children were slaughtered at the ditch of Babi Yar on September 29–30, 1941. Why do you think so many people willingly obeyed the Germans' printed orders and reported to the post?

While in line at Babi Yar, Ivan remembers the words of his father from long ago: *"Don't trust anyone and don't be a fool. You make your living and you keep your mouth shut. Don't worry about someone else's suffering—it will only bring suffering upon you."* What is the fallacy in such thought? Do you believe it's worth suffering alongside someone else, even if it brings suffering upon yourself?

How did Frederick know that Ivan planned to rebel? What was Frederick's response, and why do you think he responded the way that he did? What inner struggle pushes Frederick to the extremes of violence?

How did you feel reading the scene of Babi Yar? What emotions did it stir as you imagined Polina's panic and shame at having to remove her clothes publicly? How did you feel knowing that Josef and Klara willingly chose to sacrifice themselves in the hope that their daughter might survive?

THE DARKNESS

We've seen the portraits of several different fathers so far in the book.

- Frederick's father is calculated and cold, placing impossible-to-reach standards before his son.
- Ivan's father had a favorite in his older brother, and when Ivan's brother Misha died, his father masked his grief in anger toward his living son.
- Ivan is loving and doting, determined never to treat his children the way he was treated by his father.
- Luda's father is an alcoholic. Broken and weak, he has abused and mistreated his only daughter her entire life.
- Alexei is kind, thoughtful, and giving. He cares deeply for his children, and brings them into his own mission as a partisan.

How does fatherhood play a role throughout the novel? How are each of the characters affected by their fathers?

Describe Katya's grandmother, Baba Mysa. What makes her so endearing? What do you know of her personality?

We see Tanya, Anna, and Maria's resilience in the absence of Ivan after Babi Yar. An estimated 41 million people were killed in the country of Ukraine alone during World War II, many of those men. Women were left to fend for themselves, often in deplorable conditions. Where do you think that strength came from? Do you see the potential in yourself to step up and do hard things in a time of crisis? Why or why not?

How did you feel when it was revealed that Luda was pregnant? What did you think of her initial reaction to meeting Hans? Have you ever had an experience where you were immediately drawn to someone after having met them for the first time?

One of the most common partisan attacks in World War II was one of psychological warfare. What did you think of Katya and Luda's joke on the Nazi soldiers from the market? This scene was taken from the true story of a woman I met in Vinnitsya, Ukraine, who was involved with the underground partisan effort. After luring two naive Nazi soldiers to an apartment, she and her friend stole their guns and ran. Why do you think this tactic of warfare was effective?

What emotions did you feel when Frederick, Nikolaus and Alfonse murdered the girls from the nightclub? There is a true story of a group of dancers from a nightclub in Kiev who were found dead in an alley. No one knows exactly who killed them, but they were all dressed for the spa, so it's assumed they were tricked before being killed. In light of this information, does that scene stir any new emotions?

How did you feel when Luda rejected Oleg's affections? Do you think she made the right choice?

What was Alexei's connection to Luda's mother? What happened to separate them? How did this affect his treatment of Luda? What is Luda's mother's name? How did his revelation help Luda begin to heal?

What caused Frederick's sister, Talia, to leave home? How did this affect Frederick? Where do you think Frederick begins to break down in the story? At what point does his resolve begin to crack?

How did Ivan and Polya come to be separated after Babi Yar? Why is Ivan haunted by this memory?

What were your initial impressions of Hans? Did you trust him, or were you wary of his immediate affections toward Luda? Why do you think Luda, given all she'd been through, was so quick to trust him?

We see Masha's terror as she wakes up with vague nightmares. Later on it's revealed that her nightmares were a foreboding glimpse into her future at the German slave labor camp. Maria's story is based in the story of a woman I met in Kiev who was forced to serve in a German armament camp from ages 14 to 16. Her name was also Maria. She was tenacious and kind, and though Masha's central story is loosely based on her life, the character of Baba Mysa is based on her as an older woman. She was full of spunk and life when I met her, her blue eyes twinkling as she told her story. Does knowing this information change your perception of the character of Masha? How do you think she was able to survive such cruelty at such a young age?

How did Baba Mysa handle catching Luda with Hans? Should she have immediately told Alexei, or did you support her decision to keep Luda's secret?

Polina tells Masha on the train ride to Germany, "Everyone is afraid these days. Yours is the only family I've met who thinks of others above themselves." We'd all like to think that we would respond the way that Maria and her family did in a time of war and crisis. We want to assume that we'd be quick to help those who are facing persecution, but if you consider the great risk that Maria's family took—the fact that they could have been tortured and killed for helping their neighbors—you can

understand why so many may have kept silent. How do you think you would respond in the face of such obstacles? How did you feel when Poly's life eventually came to an end?

Why didn't Frederick kill Ivan that day they met in the woods? What stopped him? How was this action the beginning of his demise?

Luda gives her son Alexei's name instead of her own father's. Ultimately, she decides she will never tell her child of his true heritage, or of his conception. How do you feel about this? Do you sympathize with and support her decision?

Ivan asks, "Do I fault the boy for the evil that was obviously nurtured in him by a culture that doesn't see the value of human life? Do I hate the boy who's doing what he was told to do because he believes it with all his heart?" How would you answer these questions?

Do you think Blobel's assessment of Frederick in the letter he sent to Tomas was fair? How did Frederick's meeting with his father affect him? How did his actions reflect the impact of his father's visit?

Hitler had one of his hideouts constructed just outside the city of Vinnitsya, Ukraine. It was built using the forced labor of prisoners who were shot upon completion of the underground bunker. The stones used to walk upon were constructed out of the headstones from local cemeteries. Hitler would only visit this spot a couple of times. After one of these visits, an attempt was made to assassinate him, but it failed when the bomb hidden on his plane didn't detonate. This is the backbone of the story behind Oleg and Hans.

What did you feel for Hans when he worked so tirelessly to bring Oleg back to the family? What did you think when Hans declared his intentions to kill Adolf Hitler?

Baba Mysa tells Luda the story of her childhood. How does this story help change Luda's perspective on the pain and suffering of those around her?

What are your thoughts about Maria's relationship with Ewald? Do you sympathize with her naivete and foolishness? How do you feel about the way that Ewald took advantage of her?

In Frederick's flashbacks, we get a glimpse of his twisted upbringing. Though he desperately wanted to hate his mother and sister, their memories haunted him. What's one example where you saw a glimpse into Frederick's true, sensitive nature?

Frederick's father visits him a second time, and this is the interaction that sends the young man over the edge. How did Frederick react to his mother's passing? What made him finally realize that he was weak rather than strong? How did you feel when Frederick's story ended? Did you feel any sympathy or pity toward the boy, despite the horrible atrocities he committed?

There was a resurgence of faith and Christianity during the years of World War II. People longed for something to believe, some way to grasp the horror that surrounded them. Small churches formed once again while the Soviets were too busy fighting the war to worry about this religious revival. It's during this time that Tanya and Ivan begin to seek answers to their own questions, and they find a source of wisdom in Father Konstantin. What do you learn of Father Konstantin's background and story?

Father Konstantin says, "You would be surprised at the power of believing in something outside of yourself. When you acknowledge that the pain of this world is unbearable, you're able to finally surrender to the One who alone is worthy of carrying the weight." Do you believe this? Have you experienced hard times in life in which faith carried you through when the world felt dark and scary?

In this novel we see plenty of the horrors caused at the hands of the Germans, but we also meet several good Germans—men and women unwilling to accept their country’s ideals and hatred. Who was your favorite German character from the book?

What do you think of Greta? How did her friendship save Maria?

What emotions did you feel on the morning of Luda’s escape to Poland? How did you feel about her decision to flee rather than stay and hide? Was this the right choice?

How has Luda changed from the beginning of her story to the point of her escape? How has she grown and evolved as a young woman?

How did you feel when Luda and Sergei’s paths crossed? Sergei is both a Red Army soldier and a partisan. This was dangerous and risky. Do you think his willingness to take such a risk was due to the influence of his father? How so?

What are Father Konstantin’s final words to Ivan? How do those words comfort Ivan upon learning of the death of his son? When broken completely, Ivan is finally able to believe. Have you ever experienced a similar moment of brokenness in life? A time when you could do nothing more than simply whisper, “I believe”? If you’re comfortable doing so, share your experience.

What changes do you see in Maria from the beginning of the book to the end? As she interacts with Ewald one final time, how does her interaction reflect her growth?

THE DARKNESS

Part 3 finds Luda living with Sophia. What do you learn of Hans through Luda's interactions with his sister?

Ivan makes the observation that the young men returning from the war are still boys with the hardened looks of men. What effect do you think those years had on the men who survived them?

What does Maxim give Ivan and Tanya, and how does it comfort them?

How did Sergei die?

Maria is shocked to learn that, because of her years spent in Germany, she may be shunned when she returns to her homeland. This was quite common; many people who were taken prisoner and forced to serve were looked upon as traitors for many years following the war. Why do you think this was the case?

How did you feel when Maria was finally reunited with her parents?

The book ends with a glimpse into the future of each character. Maria ultimately finds love with Maxim. How does that love reconnect her with

the brother that she lost? What happened to Anna? How do you feel about her decision to remain in Germany?

How does faith ultimately play a role in Ivan and Tanya's story? How does their faith affect Maria?

Luda and Hans are finally reunited. Where had Hans been all that time? Hans seems to willingly accept his role as Sasha's father. How do you think he will do filling that role? What hopes do you have for Hans and Luda? Ivan and Tanya? Maria and Maxim?

What parts of this book moved you the most?

Which character stands out as most memorable?

Much of the content of the book deals with the evil in the world. Would you call the book "enjoyable"? If so, in what way?