

Orange Inheritance Reading Guide

Life and Fate by Vasily Grossman

Chosen by Linda Grant

'One of the greatest masterpieces of the twentieth century' *Times Literary Supplement*

'It is only a matter of time before Grossman is acknowledged as one of the great writers of the twentieth century... *Life and Fate* is a book that demands to be talked about' *Guardian*

About *Life and Fate*

Books shape our lives and transform the way we see ourselves and each other. The best books are timeless and continue to be relevant generation after generation. Vintage Classics asked the winners of The Orange Prize for Fiction which books they would pass onto the next generation and why. Linda Grant chose *Life and Fate*: **'I have urged all my friends to read it... I want others to feel as I have done - that they are entering the heart of the twentieth century, touching its pulse.'**

This is an epic tale of a country told through the fate of a single family, the Shaposhnikovs. As the battle of Stalingrad looms, Grossman's characters must work out their destinies in a world torn apart by ideological tyranny and war.

From the complex series of narratives and sub-plots, three major strands emerge which unify the novel and provide an overarching drive to the narrative: the fate and fortunes of the Shaposhnikov family, the build up to and aftermath of the battle of Stalingrad and life in the camps of Soviet Russia and Nazi Germany.

Viktor Shtrum is a talented physicist who lives with his wife, Lyudmila, and daughter, Nadya. His relationships with his family are fractious and this tension is exacerbated by problems with his research. Viktor feels guilt at the fact that his mother is facing death in a Jewish ghetto because his wife refused to have her live with the family. His wife, Lyudmila, is torn apart by grief that her son by a previous marriage, the Tolya, has been killed in the war. Viktor finds himself involved in anti-Soviet conversations at his colleague, Sokolov's house, partly to impress Sokolov's wife, Marya (Lyudmila's only friend). He later regrets these discussions out of fear that he will be denounced by the Party. Following a moment of inspiration Viktor has an idea which constitutes a major breakthrough in his work. He is initially lauded by his colleagues but criticism follows soon after, from those who perceive his discoveries to be anti-Leninist. Viktor's Jewish identity appears to be a factor in this backlash. Having refused to publicly repent, Viktor is forced to resign, until a call from Stalin himself sees him reinstated. Later, Viktor signs a letter denouncing two innocent men as the murderers of Gorky and is racked by guilt. A further source of guilt for Viktor is the mutual (albeit unconsummated) love he discovers for Marya Ivanova.

The events based around the battle of Stalingrad focus on Yevgenia Shaposhnikova (Lyudmila's sister), Krymov (her former husband), and Novikov (her lover). While she has promised to marry Novikov, Yevgenia is consumed by thoughts of her first husband. Novikov is the commander of a Soviet tank corps and is involved in the planning and execution of the counter-assault on Stalingrad. Krymov, (a Commissar) is injured during a mission to investigate the rebel stronghold House 6/1, where a small group of self-ruling soldiers have held off German attacks for weeks, despite being surrounded. Despite his staunch Party beliefs, Krymov is accused of being a traitor (perhaps by Novikov) and finds himself in prison in Moscow. Realising the strength of her love for Krymov, Yevgenia rejects Novikov and returns to Moscow where she eventually manages to get a parcel through to him. On receiving the parcel Krymov understands that Yevgenia still loves him but despairs of ever leaving the prison.

The third strand which runs throughout the novel is of life in prison camps, both in Soviet Labour camps and Nazi death camps. The focus here is not so much on the trajectories of individual characters (although we do follow the fortunes of the Old Bolshevik Mostovoskoy and the young doctor Sofya Levinton) but rather on the recurring themes of hardship, hunger, human compassion and the struggle to retain one's personal and political integrity, especially under interrogation.

Points for Discussion

Human Nature: 'Does human nature undergo a true change in the cauldron of totalitarian violence? Does man lose his innate yearning for freedom? The fate of both man and the totalitarian state depends on the answer to this question.' Do you agree with Grossman that human nature itself is our best defence against totalitarian regimes?

Moral Cowardice and fear of the state: Viktor Shtrum's decision to sign the letter denouncing Doctors Plentyov and Levin as the assassins of Gorky (mirroring Grossman's own decision to sign a letter calling for the punishment of the Jewish doctors alleged with involvement in a plot against Stalin's life) could be seen as an act of moral cowardice. Does this reveal more about Viktor, or about the power of the Soviet State?

Guilt and atonement: Could the criticisms the novel levels at both Fascism and Soviet anti-semitism be seen as an attempt on Grossman's part to atone for his guilt that his mother was killed by the Germans? (Grossman's wife had also maintained there was not room for her to live with them in their Moscow flat).

Compassion: Grossman paints incredibly moving portraits of compassion throughout the novel – as in his description of the rehabilitation of the starving Semyonov by Khristya Chunyak: 'She wiped the tears from his eyes with a towel and dried his hair and shoulders... She spread a sheepskin jacket over the stove, covered it with a piece of striped cloth, and put a large pillow at one end. Then she lifted Semyonov into the air, as easily as if he were a chicken, and laid him out on the stove.' Discuss other examples of kindness and self-sacrifice presented in the novel, for instance the story of Sofya Levinton and the boy David. Could Grossman be using these fragmentary snapshots of human decency to build a sense of piecemeal resistance to totalitarianism through the novel?

Hunger: The basic need for food is a recurring theme throughout *Life and Fate* – Grossman describes starving prisoners chewing their leather belts and shoes in a desperate search for sustenance and we learn that during the great famine 'When there were no more nettles, we ate earth... Every last grain of corn was taken away.' Why is so much emphasis placed on food in the novel and what is the significance of the descriptions of the famine of 1930-33 in particular?

The concept of 'good': Grossman explores the idea that our search to define the concept of 'good', and to impose our specific version of 'good' on our fellows has in fact been the scourge of humanity. Can most of the world's evils be reduced to the history of one man's attempt to impose his version of the collective good upon another?

Love and loyalty: Discuss the complex interplay between love and loyalty in the relationships between: Viktor and Lyudmila, Viktor and Marya Ivanova, Yevgenia Nikolaevna and Novikov and Yevgenia Nikolaevna and Krymov. How does Grossman explore the theme of fidelity through the novel?

Leadership: Getmanov and Novikov are in many ways juxtaposed in *Life and Fate*. In what ways do they represent different styles of leadership? Why do you think Novikov felt compelled to deny his sense of compassion towards the new recruits?

Science: The nuclear physicist Viktor Shtrum is in many ways a self-portrait of Vasily Grossman, a chemist himself. Grossman's excitement about science pervades the novel: 'the logic of mathematics, itself quite unconnected with the world, had become reflected and embodied in a theory of physics; and this theory had fitted with divine accuracy over a complex pattern of dotted lines on photographic paper'. How does Grossman explore political issues through his presentation of Viktor's career as a scientist and in what other ways does the theme of science enhance the novel?

Legacy: Linda Grant chose *Life and Fate* as an Inheritance Classic because she wanted others to feel 'that they are entering the heart of the twentieth century, touching its pulse'. What aspects of *Life and Fate*, in your view, make it a worthy 'Inheritance Classic'? What legacy does Grossman pass down to the reader through the novel?

Language: 'What power lies in the word! In the unfettered, carefree word! The word that is still spoken in spite of one's fears?' How does Grossman celebrate the power of language through the novel, both in the concept of freedom of speech and the beauty of the written word?

About the Author

Vasily Grossman was born in 1905. In 1941 he became a correspondent for the Red Army newspaper, *Red Star*, reporting on the defence of Stalingrad, the fall of Berlin and the consequences of the Holocaust, work collected in *A Writer at War*. In 1960 Grossman completed his masterpiece *Life and Fate* and submitted it to an official literary journal. The KGB confiscated the novel and Grossman was told that there was no chance of it being published for another 200 years. Eventually, however, with the help of Andrey Sakharov, a copy of the manuscript was microfilmed and smuggled out to the west by a leading dissident writer, Vladimir Voinovich. Grossman began *Everything Flows* in 1955 and was still working on it during his last days in hospital in September 1964.