

Reading Group Guide

Moonlight in Odessa takes place in Odessa, Ukraine in the mid-1990's. What is the significance of this time and place: the unstable period after perestroika when mobsters like Vlad and communists-turned-capitalists like Valentina took advantage; when government employees went to work but didn't get paid; and when the Internet was not yet the sophisticated tool it is today? How might the story be different if it happened today? Would the story be the same if it were set in Moscow?

Daria's grandmother influenced many of Daria's decisions, from what she studied at college to who she married. Was Daria right to listen to her grandmother? At the risk of hurting Boba, should Daria have tried earlier to become more independent? Was Daria's grandmother right to push Daria to leave Odessa? Does Daria regret her choice?

Mr. Harmon commits a terrible act. What does he do to earn Daria's forgiveness? Do you think he deserves to be forgiven? Which was more convincing, his actual apology or his atonement such as continuing to send food to Boba?

Anti-Semitism is an insidious problem in the former Soviet Union. Did you see through Olga? Did she hide her true feelings from Daria, or did Daria not want to see the truth about her neighbor?

Daria corresponds with several men over the Internet. How is meeting someone over the Internet different from traditional dating? How is it the same? Are dating sites such as e-Harmony or Match.com the same as international matchmaking sites?

There are clues that Tristan may not be a teacher. He writes "Should I of waited?" instead of "Should I have waited?" and "Its a beautiful place" rather than "It's a beautiful place". Should Daria, who is a stickler for proper English, have noticed these mistakes, or did she simply see what she wanted to in Tristan?

Did Tristan lie when he said he lived near San Francisco? How did Tristan and Daria lie to each other? Was their relationship doomed from the start?

Daria speaks English and can communicate with others. How was her friend Oksana at a disadvantage because she couldn't speak English? Do you think Oksana would have married her husband if she had been able to understand him?

What do you think about how Daria responds to America? Is she too critical? Do you think that homesickness or depression is a factor in the way she feels? Would she have had the same observations if she had lived in a city and worked in an engineering firm?

Daria loves English. How is this love expressed? She also loves literature. Does Daria understand something about Harmon when he tells her about his father using a quote from Babel, "You want to live, but he makes you die twenty times a day"? Is literature a form of solace? How do words sustain us?

When Daria is anxious, she thinks of irregular verbs; when she is unhappy or nervous she thinks of lines of poetry from Mayakovsky (“my forehead melting the glass”) or Akhmatova (“And he did not take his eyes, Staring blankly from my ring.”); and when she is happy, she plays with words (fair/fare, board/bored). How does Daria use poetry and irregular verbs to express what other language cannot?

Moonlight in Odessa takes place before Skype, low-cost calling plans, and inexpensive pre-paid phone cards were available, and Daria’s phone bill was several hundred dollars per month. Tristan explained that they had a budget and couldn’t spend so much money. Could you understand his point of view? Was he unreasonable or was Daria? Was he genuinely trying to save money or was he trying to limit Daria’s contact with the outside world? How did he try to make Daria feel at home and help her to adapt?

According to government statistics, over 150,000 foreign women advertise themselves on matchmaking sites that boast “Satisfaction guaranteed” and have “shopping cart” features just like Amazon.com. Why do you think some American men go abroad to look for a wife? Why would a smart, talented woman like Daria marry a man like Tristan? Can these marriages work?

What advice would you give to a foreign woman going to America to marry a stranger?

A study noted that American men who use International Marriage Brokers, or mail-order bride agencies, tend to seek relationships with women whom they feel they can control. Several foreign women have been brutally murdered by their American husbands. Do you think that Tristan’s abuse would have escalated if Daria had stayed?

Who was your favorite character in the book? Why? Who was your least favorite character?

Which character was the most interesting? What surprised you the most? Could you relate to the dynamics between characters, for example, Daria’s relationship with her grandmother or the treacherous office politics at the shipping company?

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