



Reading between the Lions

The Art Institute's Book Club

www.artic.edu/bookclub

DISCUSSION GUIDE

The Madonnas of Leningrad

1. Art means different things to different characters in this story. What role does art play in Marina's life? In the lives of other museum workers? Or the soldiers? What about the government?
2. What is a museum without its collection?
3. What is a society's obligation to protect/save a museum? What paintings would you save from the Art Institute of Chicago?
4. How much of your favorite museum gallery can you remember right now?
5. Were you asked to memorize anything in school? Do you still remember it? Was this memorized information ever useful at any point in your life? For interesting insights into the art of memorization, take a look at this article on memorization and memory palaces from the *New York Times*: <http://nyti.ms/pHDoid>.
6. Which did you enjoy reading more: the historical or contemporary scenes? Why?
7. How reliable is Marina for the people in her life? How reliable a storyteller is she to you, the reader?
8. Is Marina's son Dmitri's child or Apollo's? Does it matter?
9. In what ways is Helen's story similar to or different from her mother's?
10. Did you feel this book was too light for the siege of Leningrad?
11. Are the images in *Windows on the War: Soviet TASS Posters at Home and Abroad, 1941–1945*, similar to or different from the art described in the book? How did the TASS artists incorporate the experiences of the Russian people?
12. How is a Russian national character represented in the book? In the exhibition?
13. In what ways are men portrayed in the exhibition? How does this portrayal compare with the depiction of men in the book?
14. Do the TASS posters seem propagandistic to you? What do you see in the posters that makes you argue one way or the other? Does propaganda play a role in the book?
15. Alzheimer's disease was the means used to lead the reader between the book's two time periods. What did you think of Alzheimer's as this literary device?
16. If you read our other selection, *Catch-22*, compare the descriptions of war in both stories.

Suggested further reading and viewing:

Google Art Project—The Hermitage:

<http://www.googleartproject.com/museums/hermitage>
Wander the halls of the museum virtually with this new application of Google's Street View technology.

Russian Ark (film)

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=J—TDEHizVA>
A visually lush movie shot throughout the Hermitage—in a single take!

Animal Farm by George Orwell

The Kindly Ones by Jonathan Littell

A Stranger to Myself: The Inhumanity of War: Russia, 1941–1944
by Willy Peter Reese, Stefan Schmitz, Michael Hofmann, and Max Hastings

A firsthand account by a young German soldier on the Eastern front.