

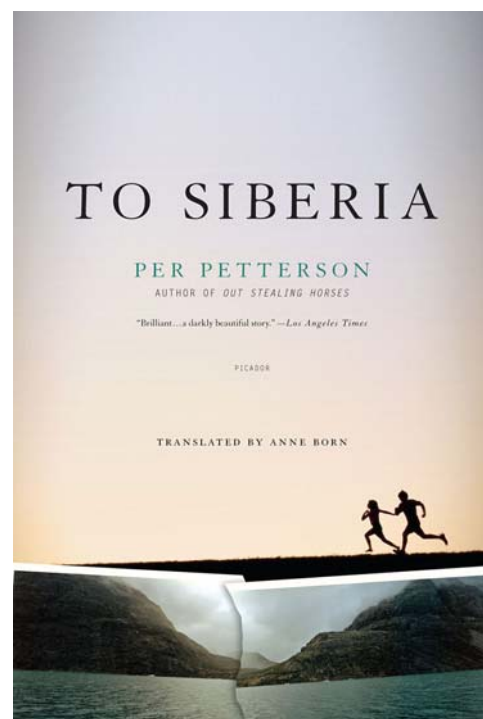
READING GROUP GUIDE

To Siberia

by Per Petterson

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About this Guide

The following author biography and list of questions about *To Siberia* are intended as resources to aid individual readers and book groups who would like to learn more about the author and this book. We hope that this guide will provide you a starting place for discussion, and suggest a variety of perspectives from which you might approach *To Siberia*.

About the Book

Per Petterson's raw, poetic novel follows the intense kinship and agonizing separation of a brother and sister in World War II-era Denmark. Their parents' neglect leaves them wandering the streets of their small village as young children, dreaming of a different life. The sister fantasizes about escaping to Siberia, but that dream seems ever more remote as her brother becomes a young man, and disappears into the resistance movement against the Nazi occupation.

First published in English in 1998, *To Siberia* is a portrait of a sister and brother bound together powerfully by birth, and separated painfully by circumstance.

About the Author

Per Petterson is the author of five novels, including *In the Wake* and *To Siberia*. *Out Stealing Horses* has won the IMPAC Dublin Literary Award, the *Independent* Foreign Fiction Prize and the Norwegian Booksellers' Prize. A former librarian and bookseller, Petterson lives in Oslo, Norway.

Discussion Questions

1. The narrator, referenced only as “Sistermine” by her brother, is never named. This increases the detachment between narrator and reader. Why do you think Petterson chose to leave her nameless?
2. Sistermine mentions her family’s dynamics early and often. “I am fond of my father. My father is fond of Jesper. Jesper is fond of me...” (p. 7-8). Why does she feel this way? Do events later in the story support this statement?
3. Jasper and Sistermine both eerily predict events that end up coming true. What do you make of Jasper foretelling his grandfather’s suicide before it happens? Of Sistermine wishing the German truck to disappear? Do these nearly impossible predictions make you question the narrator’s credibility?
4. Sistermine spends much of the book following her brother’s lead. She states, “I have a will of my own, I do not do everything I’m told, but I want to be with Jesper. He does things that are original, I like that...” (p. 11). Throughout the novel, she is constantly seeking connections with Jesper and trying to keep up with him. Do you believe she truly has “a will of her own”? Look for and discuss instances where she acts independently.
5. As much as Sistermine admires her brother, she lacks his drive and motivation to change the world. Throughout the story, she is often either following her brother or taking the path of least resistance. Why does Sistermine seem to simply let life happen to her?
6. Why don’t Sistermine and Jesper understand their grandfather’s suicide sentiment of “I cannot go on any longer” ? (p. 29). They cite his physical strength, and wonder what he could not go on with. Why don’t they understand the psychological component of his suicide?
7. What does it mean to be a Christian in this book? Think about Sistermine’s mother and the Cooperative of the town her mother grew up in. Why do you think Sistermine and Jesper don’t believe in God? Why does she feel God has abandoned her? Why does Sistermine hang a picture of Lucifer in her room?
8. Gender plays a large role in the book – women are expected to do certain types of work. Yet Sistermine’s mother holds large sway over her father. Discuss their power struggles. Who ultimately is the decision maker in the family? What circumstances is her mother in charge of?
9. Sistermine works hard to be a good pupil, saying “If I am ever to get away from this place and right to the other end of the world, I need good marks” (p 47). Ultimately, her good grades don’t get her anywhere. How would she have been different if she was allowed to go to gymnasium? Why does she ultimately flee her hometown?

10. Discuss the role of the war and German occupation in the story. While the war helps to drive the plot, it is not the main focus of the book. How does the war affect the immediate family? The community? What are their disparate reactions to the Germans?
11. What role does folklore play in the novel? Why do the characters reference the Man from Danzig so frequently?
12. Issues with authority and the struggle of the oppressed is a theme in this novel. Discuss how different characters deal with those above them throughout the story. (Within the family, Sistermine and Lone, Grandfather and Jesper's fight with the Baron, with the Germans, Sistermine and Jorgensen.) Even when the odds are insurmountable, characters continue to fight. What drives them?
13. The narrator's desire to travel to Siberia comes up again and again, beginning when she is quite young. What is going to be different about Siberia? She admits that it will still be cold, and the cold of her hometown is constantly mentioned and always unpleasant. Why is it her goal to get there, as opposed to somewhere like Jesper's dream of Morocco? What does Siberia symbolize for her? Why do you think this unfulfilled wish provides the title for the book?
14. Discuss Sistermine's romantic and sexual experiences. She desires connections with her brother, parents and friends throughout the story, and yet frequently has casual, meaningless sexual liaisons. Why does she allow Solgunn to kiss her, even though she "is not like that"? (p 203). Is her relationship with the man who visits the cafe different? Why does she go to the boxing match?
15. Sistermine knows she is pregnant immediately when it happens. Is it just a coincidence that she is correct? Why is she so calm and accepting of the fact, while her mother is furious?
16. Does Sistermine return home solely to see Jesper? How does she react when she finds out he is dead? Her brother was such a huge part of her life growing up, why do you think there is no account of her feelings?
17. The story is told by Sistermine as a woman of 60, looking back over 40 or more years. Her flashbacks are nonlinear, and her memories often travel to different times in her life unexpectedly. How did this affect your reading of the story? She still writes with an immediacy that captures the moments in time from her younger perspective with great detail. As she reminisces, is she a reliable narrator? Did you like the construction of the story? Why or why not?
18. *To Siberia* was originally written in Norwegian and translated into English. The language and flow, therefore, is not Petterson's but Anne Born's interpretation and recreation. How does this affect your reading of the story? How do you think it would be different reading it in the original language?
19. The book ends rather abruptly, and leaves loose ends. "I'm twenty-three years old, there is nothing left in life. Only the rest" (p. 245). Why do you think Petterson chose this sentiment to conclude the novel?

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